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Contents

RESEARCH ARTICLES	
Financial compliance in Cohesion Policy: how to protect the EU financial interests from domestic fraud by <i>Julia Walczyk and Nicola Francesco Dotti</i>	4-22
Socialising the European Semester? The limited influence of Danish social partners on EU policymaking by <i>Yi Ma</i>	23-41
The Inconsistency of Czech Presidential Diplomacy and the Growth of Czech Foreign Trade with China by <i>Renata Culhova and Jiri Nesiba</i>	42-61
On framing the EU: A plea for the relaunch of frame analysis in the study of elite and mass attitudes on European integration by <i>Andrea Pareschi</i>	62-80
To Tie Each Other's Hands: Italy Negotiating the Introduction of Constitutional Balanced Budget Rules and Independent Fiscal Institutions (2010-2013) by <i>Federico Bonomi</i>	81-107
The Relationships Between Europarties and European Political Groups: Changing Formal and Informal Rules and the Spitzenkandidatur by <i>Petra Ahrens and Cherry Miller</i>	108-128
Preliminary Insights into the Formation of Minimal Winning Coalitions in Western Europe by <i>Marco Improta</i>	129-143
Review of 'Research Handbook on the Politics of EU Law', Paul James Cardwell and Marie-Pierre Granger (eds.) by <i>Feyza Basar</i>	144-147

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Research Article

Financial compliance in Cohesion Policy: how to protect the EU financial interests from domestic fraud

Julia Walczyk and Nicola Francesco Dotti

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Abstract

Despite the importance of Cohesion Policy in reducing regional disparities and stimulating economic growth across member states, it has been exposed to compliance challenges. These challenges are evidenced by a higher number of errors and irregularities against other areas of the European Union's budgetary expenditure. Especially fraudulent irregularities may put the EU's financial interests at risk. The question arises, thus, how to protect this EU's largest investment area from fraudulent actions. This article addresses the following research question: How did Member States fight fraud in cohesion policy by taking preventive measures during the period 2014-2020? This contribution takes an exploratory, triangulated approach based on documentary analysis, analysis of a statistical dataset and interviews in the case of two countries, Italy and Slovakia. The findings will first show what measures Italy and Slovakia took to prevent fraud and, second, relate these measures to the countries' performance in the fight against fraud.

Keywords

Cohesion Policy; EU financial interests; Anti-fraud; Financial compliance; Italy; Slovakia

INTRODUCTION

Cohesion policy (CP) is the main European Union (EU) investment policy aiming to reduce economic, social and territorial disparities within and across member states (MS). Despite its crucial role in stimulating regional convergence, competitiveness and cross-border cooperation, CP has faced compliance impediments. These problems are evidenced by a high number of irregularities and errors detected in the three European Structural and Investment (ESI) funds constituting CP: the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), the Cohesion Fund (CF) and the European Social Fund (ESF). During the programming period 2007-2013, the European Court of Auditors (2010; 2009; 2008) reported that the number of errors and irregularities in the ESI Funds was higher than in other policy areas of the EU budgetary expenditures. Fraudulent irregularities may imply serious infringements of rules applicable to CP spending. Remarkably, CP constitutes the area of the EU budget mostly affected by compliance issues and fraud (Malan, Chen, Brady, Burillo et al. 2021: 21). Such compliance problems may harm the EU's financial interests, putting the credibility of MSs' investments from the EU budget at risk (Stephenson, Sánchez-Barrueco and Aden 2020; Kuhl 2020).

Protecting the EU's financial interests is a crucial part of the Union's agenda to increase the European citizens' confidence (see European Court of Auditors 2019a). This implies the management of the EU's financial resources in a compliant manner and taking necessary measures, both at the EU and domestic levels, to combine illegal actions, such as fraud, negatively affecting the budget. However, fraud prevention in decentralised, multilevel systems is challenging. The multilevel system, henceforth, shared management, requires articulated and coordinated actions between the European Commission and MSs to guarantee the regularity and legality of the EU expenditures (European Court of Auditors 2019a; 2019b). This challenge is relevant to protect the EU financial interests in MS when complex multilevel governance is implemented, like CP (Dotti 2013; Bachtler and Mendez 2007). The fight against fraud has become crucial for policymakers but theoretically challenging due to cross-country differences regarding administrative and institutional structures, legislative framework, (perceived) corruption levels, political stability and public procurement systems (PWC 2016a; 2016b). In this regard, the question arises regarding the 'most adequate' solutions for addressing compliance issues like fraud in CP spending.

Against this problematic backdrop, this article investigates how MSs fight fraud in CP by taking preventive measures, with specific reference to the programming period 2014-2020. This article seeks to bring both academic and policy contributions. As for the academic relevance, the objective is to contribute to the existing literature on CP and financial compliance by interrogating how MSs have fought domestic fraud in this substantial area of the EU budgetary expenditure. In this regard, the article follows the argument that preventive anti-fraud measures taken domestically facilitate CP expenditures, protecting the EU financial interests (Oroszki 2019). For this purpose, two different cases are compared, Italy and Slovakia, to have a founder and newer MS, a large and a mid-size country, both having significant interregional disparities. Finally, both MSs are beneficiaries of CP and adopted a National Anti-Fraud Strategy. From a policy perspective, this article aims to address and deliver lessons for practitioners. Based on the findings from the two case studies, policy practitioners can see how fraud prevention measures can contribute to improving CP investments. In the programming period 2021-2027, the European Commission reduced the number of guidelines on how to interpret the rules applicable to the ESI Funds. Therefore, the policy messages are meant to help policy-practitioners design adequate anti-fraud preventive measures.

Our paper continues by reviewing by the extant scholarly literature on financial compliance in CP and explaining our contribution to this literature. This review is followed by presenting our analytical framework, case selection and data collection. We present and discuss our empirical findings. Finally, we draw conclusions and provide key policy messages.

FINANCIAL COMPLIANCE IN COHESION POLICY

In CP, financial compliance entails ensuring conformity of spending with EU and national rules. Specifically, compliance involves ensuring correct payments and the imposition of financial corrections to withdraw ineligible expenditures and guarantee efficient management and control systems (Stephenson, Sánchez-Barrueco and Aden 2020; Kuhl 2020). Financial compliance has clear policy relevance, but how to achieve it is still open for debate. Hence, several scholars have investigated this notion to identify the most effective approaches (for example Mendez and Bachtler 2017; Davies and Polverari 2011; Cipriani 2010).

Existing studies have identified several deficiencies in financial compliance in CP related to its shared management system (Stephenson 2015; Stephenson, Sánchez-Barrueco, and Aden 2020; Laffan 2003; Davies and Polverari 2011; Cipriani 2010; Bachtler, Mendez and Miller 2017). Shared management implies the involvement of multiple tiers of government and, for each of them, multiple actors. However, this system is unlikely to guarantee substantial compliance for three main reasons. First, while compliance checks are supposed to fall under MSs' responsibilities, these national actors have incentives to neither devote their resources to controlling Funds expenditure nor to impose financial corrections (Cipriani 2010). Second, the European Commission's compliance powers are limited because of being dependent upon national authorities that are the primary control levels (Kuhl 2020; Davies and Polverari 2011). Third, limited 'hard law' applies to the EU budgetary expenditure (Stephenson, Sánchez-Barrueco and Aden 2020). A meta-reason relates to the so-called 'methodological challenge', i.e. the European Court of Auditors has limited available data for audits, having to rely on lower levels instead of acquiring more supplemental data (Stephenson 2015; Laffan 2003; Davies and Polverari 2011).

Previous studies have identified administrative capacity as the critical factor influencing CP spending (Mendez and Bachtler 2017; Incaltarau, Pascariu and Surubaru 2020; Aivazidou, Cunico and Mollona 2020). In this perspective, administrative capacity is identified as a critical factor for compliant CP expenditures. A relevant aspect emerging from these studies is that 'weak' administrative capacity is not specific to the newer MSs (for example Slovakia, Bulgaria, Romania and Czechia), but it also affects the 'older' ones, such as Greece, Italy and Spain (Verheijen 2007; Terracciano and Graziano 2016; Surubaru 2017; Moreno 2020; Bachtler, Mendez and Oraže 2014). As possible solutions to weak administrative capacity, scholars suggest i) strengthening the management and control systems ('hard' measures) and ii) building the administrative capacities using the technical assistance offered by the European Commission ('soft' measures). By articulating hard and soft measures, MSs can build their administrative capacities to safeguard the EU's financial interests (Stephenson, Sánchez-Barrueco and Aden 2020; Kuhl 2020). In this regard, it must be stressed that financial compliance is a pre-condition for effective spending (Cipriani 2010). Although some anti-fraud measures have been previously discussed, little scholarly work focused on how such measures are implemented, hence how these measures work in practice. This academic gap requires further investigation to identify whether and how MSs have addressed the problem of fraud in CP investments domestically.

This article aims to address this gap in the existing CP literature. Specifically, it investigates two aspects. First, it analyses two different MSs (Italy and Slovakia), reconstructing whether and how frauds were prevented at the domestic level. Second, to relate these measures to financial compliance, this article examines yearly trends in reported irregularities, especially fraudulent ones. The objective is to demonstrate whether the implemented fraud preventive measures contributed to minimising the occurrence of fraudulent irregularities in both countries concerned.

ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

This article combines key theoretical approaches from three International Relations theories: rationalism, management and constructivism. These theories differently explain

why states comply (or do not) with international obligations, such as EU Law. Each theory offers different solutions to compliance problems (Versluis 2005).

According to rationalism, non-compliance occurs when compliance costs (material costs) exceed compliance benefits, i.e. the importance of having a 'good' supra-national reputation (Simmons 1998; Chayes and Chayes 1993). Therefore, rationalists rely on enforcement measures, namely the 'naming and shaming' strategy, monitoring and punishing/sanctioning (Simmons 1998; Börzel and Buzogány 2019). As for CP, 'monitoring' is one of the key anti-fraud measures and encompasses systems of financial controls. The 'naming and shaming' strategy is mainly used for late and incorrect transpositions of EU legislation in the area of the internal market rather than in CP (Scholten 2017; Koops 2011). 'Sanctioning' is somewhat limited in CP, considering that only a few cases of criminal sanctions have been imposed, whereas administrative sanctions are not applicable in this policy area (Kuhl 2020: 124-125). As explained earlier, financial corrections shall be imposed if an ineligible expenditure is detected. Since financial corrections imply withdrawing unduly spent expenditure, thus, entailing 'material costs', these measures can be considered rationalist (i.e. punishing) measures. To sum up, 'monitoring' and 'sanctioning' are the most relevant measures selected for our analytical framework.

In contrast to rationalism, the management theory accounts for non-compliance as a consequence, of poor MS capacities, namely financial, administrative or technical ones or rules ambiguity (Hartlapp 2007; Börzel and Buzogány 2019). 'Managerialists' argue that non-compliance should be addressed via rules interpretation, capacity-building measures and financial assistance (i.e. funding) (Versluis and Tarr 2013; Börzel and Buzogány 2019). To address non-compliant actions in CP, administrative capacity-building measures are considered to be the most essential ones (Mendez and Bachtler 2017; Kuhl 2020). Next to the administrative capacity-building measures, rule interpretations via guidelines need to be considered. Notably, guidelines help clarify a broad set of rules applicable to the ESI Funds, such as public procurement, state aid, management and control systems (Cipriani 2010). Guidelines facilitate, thus, proper interpretation and application of these rules, which is crucial for compliant spending of the funds. Regarding financial assistance, for instance, via EU funding, this 'managerialist' measure is not relevant to our analytical framework. This stems from the reason that the objective of this article is not to examine whether EU funding (in our case – the ESI funds), facilitates tackling fraud but what preventive measures were implemented to address the problem of these illegal actions in the CP investments. Therefore, 'administrative capacity-building measures' and 'rules interpretation' are chosen for our analytical framework.

Finally, according to constructivism, non-compliance occurs if EU rules are not perceived domestically as 'natural, rightful, expected and legitimate ones', which follows the 'logic of appropriateness' (March and Olsen 2011). 'Constructivists' advocate for persuasion measures under processes of socialisation, implying a process based on belief in 'moral force' and learning (Finnemore 1993; Checkel 2001). Regarding CP, a specific type of learning, namely policy learning, via peer-to-peer exchanges and networking activities, is observed as an important part of the implementation of the ESI Funds. In other words, this social process facilitates exchanging knowledge and best policy practices between national, regional, and local actors from different EU countries. Moreover, policy learning is considered an essential aspect of financial compliance, thanks to stimulating performance improvement. Therefore, 'policy learning' is selected as the most relevant 'constructivist' measure for the analytical framework.

These theoretical approaches are selected to identify how fraud could be prevented, thus safeguarding financial compliance. Table 1 summarises the analytical framework combining these theories to answer the research question. Thus, we first explore how fraud was prevented domestically and, next, how these actions fit the different approaches.

Table 1. Summary of the analytical framework.

Theory	Definition and possible solutions	Relevance for CP
Rationalism	'Naming and shaming' strategy	No This strategy is mainly used for late or incorrect Directives transposition in Internal Market, not for CP (Scholten 2017; Koops 2011)
	Monitoring/ Controlling	Yes Control mechanisms are one key measure to fight against fraud, encompassing financial controls (Kuhl 2020).
	Punishing	Yes Financial corrections imply withdrawing undue Funds expenditure, thus, entailing 'material costs'.
Management	Capacity-building	Yes Administrative capacity-building measures are the key to preventing fraud (Mendez and Bachtler 2017; Kuhl 2020).
	Rules interpretation	Yes Rules interpretation via guidelines help clarify rules applicable to CP Funds, such as public procurement rules, state aid, and financial controls (Kuhl 2020; Cipriani 2010).
	Funding	No This article does not examine whether CP spending stimulates financial compliance but what measures are relevant to prevent fraud in these Funds and, thus, stimulate better compliance.
Constructivism	Learning	Yes In the CP context, policy learning is an important process facilitating the exchange of policy knowledge and best practices between different Member States' authorities (Sbaraglia 2016; Dotti 2016).

Source: authors' research

CASE SELECTION AND DATA COLLECTION

This article uses a comparative case study encompassing two countries, Italy and Slovakia. The comparative case study makes it possible to benchmark domestic anti-fraud measures instead of focusing on a single country. This will show potential similarities and differences between them in tackling fraud, which allows for answering the research question. The article's objective is to focus on two MSs with different CP traditions as evidenced by i) CP domestic system (i.e. the number of operational programmes and managing authorities), ii) state's contribution to the EU budget, and iii) period of the EU membership. Therefore, Italy and Slovakia represent the most different system design (MDSD). First, Italy has a more complex domestic system of CP management when compared to Slovakia. More specifically, Italy had fifty operational programmes to implement during 2014-2020, whereas Slovakia had only nine. In addition, these two countries differ in the number of regions – Italy has 20 regions ('*regioni*') whereas Slovakia has eight ('*kraje*'). Indeed, this difference further highlights the complexity of implementing the ESI Funds at sub-national levels. Second, although CP plays an essential role in the regional development of both MSs, Italy is one of the main net-contributors to the EU budget, whereas Slovakia is a net beneficiary. Third, these countries followed different parts of the EU's membership, which reflects their different traditions with CP: Italy is a founding member of the EU, while Slovakia is a 'newer' member, among those who joined the EU in 2004.

Despite these differences, Slovakia and Italy are similar in a relevant aspect concerning tackling fraud as both adopted their 2014-2020 National Anti-Fraud Strategy (NAFS). In fact, a NAFS is crucial to protect the EU's financial interests domestically due to facilitating and structuring necessary measures to combat fraud (European Commission 2020a; European Court of Auditors 2019a). Remarkably, not all MSs adopted their NAFS 2014-2020. For instance, all net contributors to the EU budget but France and some of the main beneficiaries of CP funding (Poland, Romania and Spain) (European Commission 2020a: 14) did not adopt NAFS.

Considering these similarities and differences, Italy and Slovakia constitute representative cases for our scope. In principle, France would also fit the selection criteria resembling Italy, but it received less CP funding. Hence, it would be a less representative case to interrogate the implementation of fraud preventive measures.

In terms of temporality, this case study focuses on the programming period 2014-2020. As explained earlier, the preceding period, 2007-2013, was marked by an exceptionally high level of irregularities and errors in CP. MSs were, thus, expected to take necessary measures to reduce the number of infringements in CP spending and protect the EU financial interests from fraudulent actions. The EU legal framework applicable to CP 2014-2020 (i.e. the Common Provision Regulation, CPR) required MSs to 'put in place effective and proportionate anti-fraud measures' (European Commission 2014: 7). Moreover, according to Article 325 TFEU, all MSs must take the necessary measures to combat fraud affecting the EU budget. Therefore, the adoption of NAFS enabled Italy and Slovakia to comply with their obligations stemming from the CPR 2014-2020 and Article 325 TFEU.

Table 2. Summary of case study selection.

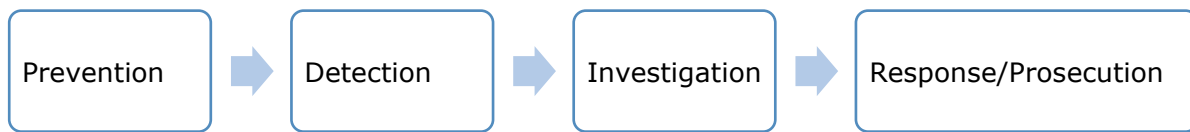
Selection criteria	Italy	Slovakia
Number of Operational Programmes (OP) 2014-2020	50	9
Number of Managing Authorities (MA)	8 national MAs 30 regional MAs	5 national MAs 2 regional MAs
Contribution to the EU budget	Net-contributor	Net-beneficiary
Tradition with cohesion policy (based on EU membership)	Founding Member, since 1958	Since 2004
Adoption and notification National Anti-Fraud Strategy 2014-2020	Yes	Yes

Source: based on authors' research

The article combines qualitative and quantitative methodology. First, it uses a documentary analysis as the primary data source to explore fraud preventive measures taken by Italy and Slovakia. The selected documents encompass the EU sources, such as the Annual reports on protecting the EU's financial interests (PIF) and national documents (i.e. National Anti-Fraud Strategies, NAFS). These findings are triangulated with eight semi-structured interviews with EU Commission officials and national officials from Italy and Slovakia, combining the different viewpoints. The statistical dataset from the PIF Reports is the second main source of information. These reports provide yearly trends of irregularities as reported by Italy and Slovakia to the EU Commission. The analysis of this statistical dataset seeks to assess the MS performances in fraud combat. Particular attention is given to the yearly number of fraudulent irregularities reported. The empirical results of this analysis are presented in the following section.

PROTECTION OF THE EU'S FINANCIAL INTERESTS IN CP VIA TACKLING FRAUD IN ITALY AND SLOVAKIA

Figure 1 presents the four steps of the anti-fraud management cycle (Oroszki 2019). The first step is prevention aiming to mitigate the risk of fraud occurrence. Detection is the second step involving a comprehensive system of checks (for example software or other analytical tools) to discover and disclose fraud (European Court of Auditors 2019b). The third step, investigation, involves criminal and administrative proceedings by competent authorities (i.e. the European Anti-Fraud Office (OLAF) or the national homologues) via scrutinising relevant data and records concerning suspected fraud. Lastly, response, called 'prosecution', involves recovering unduly paid expenditures via the imposition of financial corrections.

Figure 1. Anti-fraud management cycle (Source: Oroszki 2019).

Indeed, administrative procedures within detection, investigation and prosecution may not always successfully prove and recover financial damages caused by fraud (European Commission 2014). Fraud prevention is considered more cost-effective than the following steps of the anti-fraud management cycle (Oroszki 2019; European Commission 2019a). In the case of CP, the 'Anti-Fraud Coordination Service' (AFCOS) plays a crucial role. The AFCOS is a network of national authorities and bodies – judicial as well as administrative ones – designated by each MS. The authorities under the AFCOS are responsible for implementing anti-fraud measures and cooperating between the national government and the OLAF.

Within the programming period 2014-2020, Italy and Slovakia took several measures to minimise the risk of fraud in CP investments. The following subsections present similarities and differences between these two MSs in fraud preventive approaches.

Management and Control Systems of the ESI Funds

Management and control systems of the ESI Funds involve detecting potential cases of fraud via different audit and control activities such as on-spot checks, internal fraud-reporting mechanisms, data analytics and fraud indicators (European Commission 2019a; European Court of Auditors 2019b). Therefore, ensuring efficient management and control systems is essential to minimise the risk of fraud occurrence, along with its damages to the EU's budget (European Commission 2017c; 2014; European Court of Auditors 2019b).

In Italy, the 'Corte dei Conti' (Court of Auditors) regularly conducted compliance audits on the internal management and control systems. The audits' objective was to assess the quality and identify potential weaknesses in these systems (Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri 2019; 2018). In this regard, Italy established new eligibility criteria for the ESI Funds management, monitoring and on-spot checks (European Commission 2016a). These criteria supported addressing weaknesses in the internal management and control systems to ensure eligibility of funds expenditure, one of the pre-conditions to prevent fraudulent actions, for instance, documents forgery or manipulation of project costs (European Commission 2016a; Interview 8). Furthermore, the Italian Ministry of Economy and Finance (i.e. the Auditing Authority) took several measures aimed at strengthening the efficiency of the internal management and control systems, encompassing national guidelines, continuous monitoring of the OPs implementation and training activities to upskill the public administrative staff (Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri 2017). Notably, these measures were reported as 'relevant' to protect the EU's financial interests from fraud in CP (Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri 2020).

In Slovakia, the Ministry of Finance (i.e. the Auditing Authority) carried out annual audits on the internal management and control systems to verify the quality of risk assessment in ESI-funded projects (Government of the Slovak Republic 2015; Interview 4). These systems were regularly adjusted to ensure their compliance with the Common Provision Regulation 2014-2020 and what the government defined as their 'resilience to fraud' (Government of the Slovak Republic 2015; European Commission 2015a). Like Italy, Slovakia established new eligibility criteria for monitoring, on-spot checks and management of the ESI Funds. Importantly, these criteria helped increase the transparency of verification of ESI Funds projects, a crucial element to minimise the risk of fraud.

Summing up, the measures taken by Italy and Slovakia, respectively, to strengthen the ESI Fund's management and control systems fall into different categories in line with the analytical framework. First, regular checks of these systems carried out by Slovak and Italian authorities have controlling objectives, thus, 'rationalist' measures. Second, the aforementioned new eligibility criteria applicable to the programming period 2014-2020 were crucial to increasing transparency of the ESI Funds projects in both countries. Indeed, transparency measures align with the 'management' theory (Versluis 2005; Tallberg 2002).

Training Activities

Training played a crucial role in the case of Italy, upskilling Italian authorities in fraud prevention in CP 2014-2020 (Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri 2020; 2019; 2018; 2017). Particularly, Italy focused on the application of EU and national rules applicable to management and controls of the ESI Funds, on the use of Arachne as a software tool for fraud prevention and exchange about the most frequent causes of errors and fraud (Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri 2020). Importantly, Italy's training activities involved central, regional and local authorities in charge of the ESI Funds. The participation of these multilevel authorities is essential to maximise the opportunities for exchanging knowledge and best practices in fraud prevention. The collaboration among those different authorities via training activities was observed as a good practice example of the partnership in tackling fraud. Unlike previous findings (Milio 2014; Dąbrowski, Bachtler and Bafoil 2014; Blom-hansen 2005), these actions seem to have had positive effects on the CP principle of partnership. The involvement of central and subnational authorities in joint training activities was identified as a positive element (Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri 2020).

Similar to Italy, Slovakia's training activities covered numerous aspects concerning the protection of the EU's financial interests in CP, such as the management and control systems, the most common mistakes in conducting financial controls and audits, and the use of Arachne (Úrad vlády Slovenskej republiky 2020; 2019; 2018; 2016; Interview 4). Moreover, public procurement in ESI Funds expenditure was one of the key thematic areas of the training for Slovak authorities (Government of the Slovak Republic 2015). Notably, a sizeable amount of CP investments is spent via public procurement, an area particularly marked by compliance problems (i.e. errors) (PWC 2016a; 2016b). Therefore, strategic use of public procurement is essential to increase the efficiency of CP investments and ensure compliant spending. More specifically, the training in public procurement implemented by Slovakia covered clarifying the amendments in public procurement law, the most common infringements in this law, and the overall process and control of public procurement procedures in CP investments. Significantly, these public procurement aspects covered the training were reported relevant to minimise the risk of fraud in CP.

The training activities in both countries fall into two types of measures in line with the analytical framework. On the one hand, these activities were 'management' measures because of building the administrative capacity and clarifying the relevant rules applicable to CP investments, such as public procurement, the processes of management and controls. On the other hand, the training activities serve as educational measures by explaining the most common cases of fraud, facilitating the exchange of knowledge and anti-fraud practices among AFCOS' partners in both countries (Úrad vlády Slovenskej republiky 2019; Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri 2020). Thus, those training activities stimulated policy learning, which aligns with constructivism.

Peer-To-Peer Networking

In CP, policy learning takes place via peer-to-peer networking measures to share knowledge and best practices in implementing and managing the ESI Funds among central, regional or local authorities (Stephenson, Sánchez-Barrueco and Aden 2020; Sbaraglia 2016). These measures take the form of different networks, for instance 'the three flagship initiatives' offered by DG REGIO to MSs authorities, namely TAIEX PEER-2-PEER, Regio

Community of Practitioners and Training Programmes (Interview 1; 2), as well as cross-country cooperation projects.

For Italy, peer-to-peer networking took place within the international project 'Cooperation in the Anti-Fraud Sector' (see Liberatore, Zedde and Branchi 2017). That project was created for the National Anti-Fraud Committee's (COLAF's) initiative during Italy's Council Presidency in 2014 (Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri 2017). That initiative aimed to facilitate 'administrative assistance' among the 16 participating countries to prevent fraud in the ESI Funds. The project activities resulted in identifying major solutions for fraud prevention in the ESI Funds: improving, facilitating, and speeding up the exchange of information across MSs, along with promoting joint actions such as anti-fraud good practices and methods (see Liberatore, Zedde and Branchi 2017). Indeed, the 'Cooperation in the Anti-Fraud Sector' project was recognised as a fundamental step toward protecting the EU's financial interests from fraud in CP. Accordingly, those actions served as a prominent example of peer-to-peer networking. Italy played a leading role by creating room for cooperation and mutual learning between the partner countries.

Between 2015 and 2020, Slovakia used three TAIEX REGIO PEER 2 PEER exchanges to upgrade their administrative capacities in CP related to tackling fraud. The exchanges took place in two workshops and one experts' mission, two forms of this Commission's flagship initiative (PPMI Group 2021; Interview 2). First, the expert mission in 2015 involved a three-day visit by the Portuguese Auditing Authority to Bratislava to provide Slovak authorities with to share best practices in public procurement (European Commission 2015b). Second, in 2017, Slovak authorities participated in the Simplified Cost Options (SCOs) working group under the ERDF framework. Remarkably, the SCOs, one of the most crucial simplification measures to reduce administrative burden and the risk of errors, had been used widely by Slovakia (European Commission 2017a). That TAIEX PEER 2 PEER workshop enabled, thus, the Slovak authorities to learn how to use the SCOs in CP investments to prevent compliance-related mistakes. Third, in 2020, the Slovak authorities participated in a multi-country workshop on the conflict of interests in the ESI Funds, a critical area to combat fraud affecting the EU's financial interests (European Commission 2019a; 2018). That workshop provided the Slovak authorities with knowledge on how to tackle conflict of interests and how to amend national legislation simplifying its existing methodological framework (European Commission 2020b; Interview 4). Finally, TAIEX REGIO PEER TO PEER exchanges taken by Slovakia supported its national authorities in three relevant areas related to fraud prevention, public procurement, the use of SCOs, and the conflict of interests. Indeed, TAIEX PEER 2 PEER serves as a crucial tool for administrative capacity-building in CP (Interview 1). As stressed by some respondents from the DG REGIO's side, TAIEX REGIO PEER 2 PEER actions 'help to address problems on the ground' by 'creating a space for the exchange of knowledge and best practices' (Interview 1; 2). Thus, as demonstrated in the Slovak case, such exchanges serve as good practice examples of policy learning measures to tackle fraud.

Summing up, the peer-to-peer networking activities taken by Italy and Slovakia constitute two measures in line with the analytical framework. First, those networking activities facilitated knowledge sharing and good practices in fraud prevention, thus, policy learning. Second, policy learning via peer-to-peer networking actions stimulated the administrative capacity-building of Italian and Slovak authorities. Therefore, those actions serve as both 'management' and 'constructivist' measures.

Legislative Measures

In the CP context, the primary objective of legislative measures, such as regulations, guidelines and national anti-corruption programmes, is to streamline rules and responsibilities for implementing, managing and controlling the ESI Funds (European Commission 2020a; 2015a). Indeed, national legislative measures are essential elements in protecting the EU's financial interests.

In Italy, COLAF adopted 'strategic guidelines' to disseminate relevant fraud preventive measures, such as training, efficient systems of management and control of the ESI Funds (Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri 2019; 2018). Those guidelines were directed to central, regional and local authorities to facilitate cooperation between them in fraud prevention (see Interview 7). Notably, the Italian guidelines had a policy learning purpose in tackling fraud. Put differently, the COLAF's guidelines supported the Italian authorities 'to learn', providing anti-fraud approaches and avoiding fraud-related mistakes in CP expenditures. However, Italy used its only internal guidelines to clarify the relevant definitions related to protecting the EU's financial interests (see also Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri 2020). Nevertheless, Italy reported not using guidelines issued by the European Commission (European Commission 2015a). Remarkably, eight MSs, including Italy, used only their internal guidelines, whereas 13 used both the Commission's and their internal ones. As emphasised by the respondents from OLAF, MSs should use their internal guidelines and the Commission's guidelines in a complementary manner to get a comprehensive clarification of relevant rules and terms concerning fraud combat (Interview 3; 7).

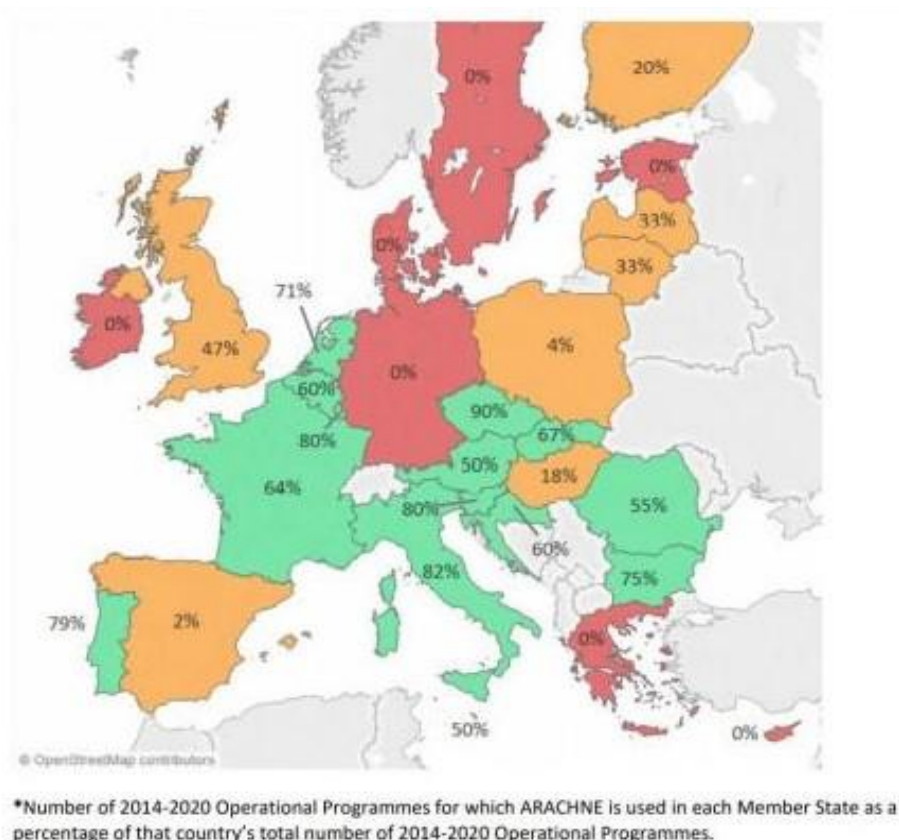
Slovakia amended its national legislation on financial controls and internal auditing of the ESI Funds (Act No. 502/2001) to enforce national rules with the CPR 2014-2020 (European Commission 2015a: 46). Owing to increasing transparency and restricting the scope of abuse of the funds, that Act amendment served as a relevant legislative measure to minimise the risk of fraud in CP investments (see also Government of the Slovak Republic 2015). Moreover, in 2019, the Slovak Ministry of Finance issued novel methodological guidelines on financial controls and audits of the ESI Funds encompassing public procurement, conflict of interests and financial frauds (European Commission 2020a: 18-19). Those guidelines clarified and consolidated the controls and auditing procedures applicable to the period 2014-2020 (Úrad vlády Slovenskej republiky 2020). Like Italy, Slovakia used its internal (i.e. national) guidelines to complement those issued by the EU Commission, clarifying the interpretation of important terms related to the protection of the EU financial interests (for example fraud, suspected fraud, irregularity, AFCOS' responsibilities). Notably, the guidelines used by Slovakia were confirmed to constitute 'the basis of successful prevention of fraud and irregularities' in CP investments (European Commission 2020a: 18).

The legislative measures implemented by Italy and Slovakia serve as three types of measures in line with the analytical framework. First, the amendment of the Slovak Act No 502/2001 serves as a 'rationalist' measure due to enforcing the relevant rules applicable to CP 2014-2020. Second, the guidelines used by both countries constitute 'management' measures because of clarifying the relevant CP rules. Third, the 'strategic guidelines' issued by Italian COLAF stimulated policy learning, which fits constructivism.

Arachne

Arachne is an integrated IT analytical tool for data mining and data enrichment developed by the European Commission and offered to MSs free of charge (European Court of Auditors 2019a; Interview 3). More specifically, it serves as a risk-scoring tool supporting MSs' authorities in their administrative controls, checks and verifications of CP projects via identifying risk-based information on project beneficiaries, contractors and sub-contractors (European Commission 2016b, Interview 3). Although the Commission issues information on Arachne available to all MSs, this tool is voluntary because of no legal obligation to enforce it. Remarkably, during the programming period 2014-2020, Arachne was divergently used across the EU countries. For instance, Germany, Greece and Ireland did not implement this tool in their operational programmes, while Hungary, Poland and Spain used it only partially (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. The use of Arachne in the number of OPs 2014-2020 (Source: European Court of Auditors 2019a).



As shown in Figure 2, both Italy and Slovakia belonged to the best-performing MSs concerning the use of Arachne in their OPs implementation. The training activities implemented by both countries supported their authorities by upskilling them in the use of this tool (Úrad vlády Slovenskej republiky 2020; Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri 2020; Malan et al. 2021). As respondents from the EU Commission's side explained, Arachne facilitates MSs to prevent fraudulent use of the ESI Funds, which can be, consequently, depicted by errors and fraudulent irregularities concerning projects, beneficiaries, contractors and sub-contracts (Interview 3; 5; 7). Indeed, Arachne is considered one of the essential measures supporting fraud prevention in CP investments (European Commission 2019a; 2016b; Interview 3; 5; 7). According to the interviewees, the EU Commission actively supports and recommends using this tool via issuing guidelines and organising training sessions and bilateral meetings with MSs' authorities. Nevertheless, MSs, in general, 'roughly follow' these recommendations (Interview 3). Therefore, in this perspective, Italy and Slovakia can be seen as positive exceptions, using Arachne to minimise the risk of fraud in their OPs 2014-2020.

Arachne's role can be considered a tool as a 'rationalist' measure. Such a categorisation of Arachne into the analytical framework stems from its 'controlling objective' – supporting administrative controls, checks and management of the ESI Funds projects.

ASSESSMENT OF ITALY AND SLOVAKIA'S PERFORMANCES IN TACKLING FRAUD

As summarised in Table 3, the fraud preventive measures taken by Italy and Slovakia constitute different anti-fraud approaches in line with the analytical framework. Notably, some of those measures fit more than one theory as this can be conceptualised from different angles. For instance, the measures taken by the Italian Ministry of Economy and Finance had different purposes: training sessions to upskill the Italian authorities (i.e. administrative capacity-building), controlling the OPs implementation (i.e. monitoring),

and guidelines (i.e. rules interpretation). All these actions had the overarching objective of strengthening the internal, multilevel system for managing and controlling CP expenditures. Similar 'spillover effects' were observed in the TAIEX REGIO PEER 2 PEER exchanges used by Slovakia. These exchanges facilitated policy learning stimulating administrative capacity for the Slovak authorities.

Compared with some previous EU law compliance research (Versluis 2005; Versluis and Tarr 2013; Tallberg 2002; Hartlapp 2007), this analysis shows that guidelines go beyond a 'management' perspective to address compliance problems. Guidelines may have three purposes for fraud prevention: rules enforcement, interpretation and learning. As a result, these empirical findings showed that guidelines might also constitute 'rationalist' or 'constructivist' measures. Along these lines, this article found that training fits with the management theory (see also Börzel and Buzogány 2019) and constructivism because of supporting rules interpretation. Lastly, neither Italy nor Slovakia was found to have taken 'punishing' measures (i.e. financial corrections). This finding can be explained by the embedment of financial corrections in the anti-fraud management cycle. Put differently, the imposition of financial corrections does not fall into the preventive but the last step of this cycle (Oroszki 2019).

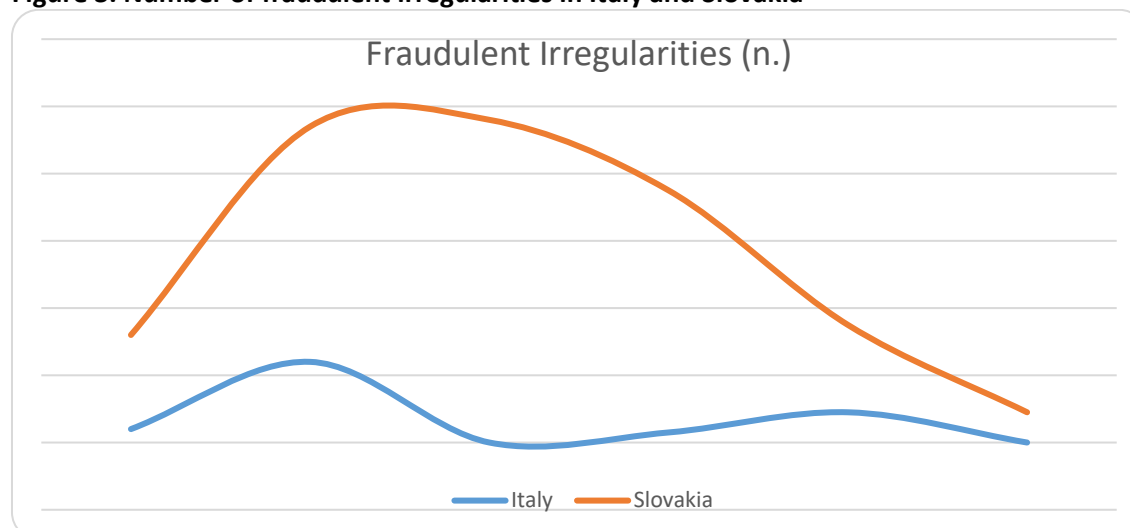
Table 3. Summary of fraud preventive measures: Italy-Slovakia benchmark.

Anti-fraud preventive measure	Measure type for Italy	Measure type for Slovakia
Checks and adjustments of the internal systems of management and controls	Rationalism	Rationalism
Trainings	Management Constructivism	Management Constructivism
International project 'Cooperation in the Anti-Fraud Sector'	Constructivism	n/a
TAIEX REGIO PEER 2 PEER exchanges	n/a	Constructivism Management
Guidelines	Management Constructivism	Management Rationalism
Arachne	Rationalism	Rationalism

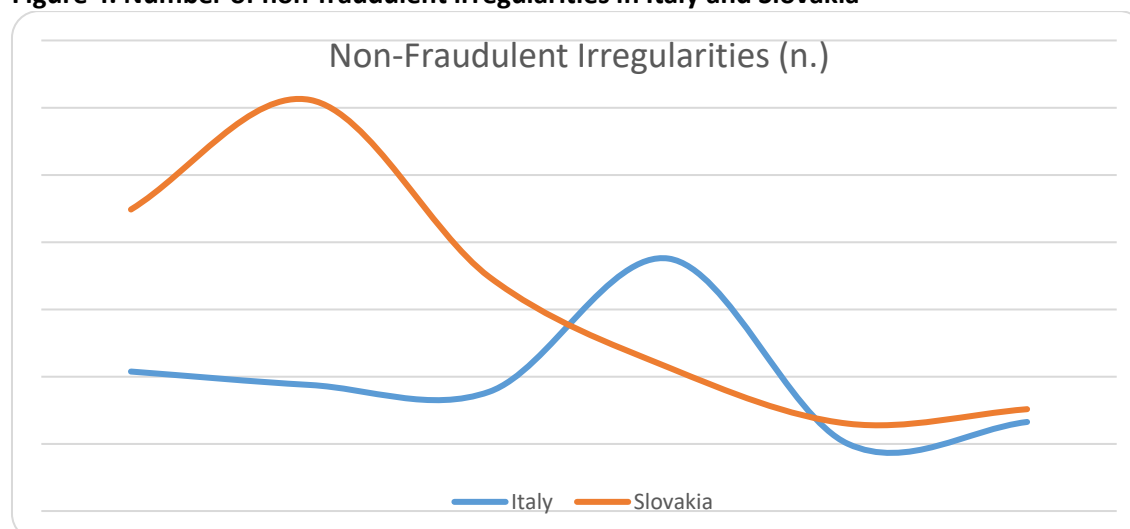
Finally, the analysis is completed by examining the fraud cases reported in Italy and Slovakia. Figures 3 and 4 below present the overview of yearly trends of fraudulent and non-fraudulent irregularities detected and reported by each country. Based on the data presented, some observations must be considered. First, these findings align with existing scholarly arguments: not every irregularity is a fraud (Stephenson, Sánchez-Barrueco and Aden 2020; Cipriani 2010). Indeed, as far as Italy and Slovakia are concerned, most irregularities reported were non-fraudulent ones.

Regarding the trends in fraudulent irregularities, Italy and Slovakia had strong, different patterns despite fluctuations. More specifically, Slovakia had a higher number of fraudulent irregularities than Italy, which was at its peak in 2016. However, both countries had the lowest number of fraudulent irregularities in 2019, towards the end of the programming period. In this regard, the link with implementing fraud preventive measures is observable. As shown by the empirical findings in the previous section, the anti-fraud measures had different timing for their implementation. In other words, some of those measures were implemented more regularly, such as training activities and checks of the internal management and control systems. In contrast, others are less regular, such as peer-to-peer networking. Thus, their effects were prolonged.

Some comparative points on fraud prevention strategies implemented by Italy and Slovakia can be drawn. First, both countries implemented training activities for their national authorities to improve their administrative capacities. Second, both MSs used Arachne to a large extent in their OPs. Third, the Auditing Authorities of both countries audited the internal systems of management and control of the ESI Funds regularly. Finally, both MSs established new eligibility criteria to increase the Funds expenditure verification.

Figure 3. Number of fraudulent irregularities in Italy and Slovakia

Source: European Commission 2015a; 2016a; 2017b; 2018; 2019b; 2020a.

Figure 4. Number of non-fraudulent irregularities in Italy and Slovakia

Source: European Commission 2015a; 2016a; 2017b; 2018; 2019b; 2020a.

On the other hand, Italy and Slovakia showed some differences. First, they used different peer-to-peer networking measures: Italy led the cross-country project 'Cooperation in the Anti-Fraud Sector', whereas Slovakia used the three TAIEX PEER 2 PEER exchanges. Second, although both countries used their internal guidelines, only Slovakia completed them with the European Commission guidelines. In addition, the internal guidelines used by Italy and Slovakia had different purposes in line with the analytical framework. Italian guidelines had learning and clarification purposes, whereas Slovak ones were meant to enforce and clarify the CP rules. Lastly, the Italian authorities demonstrated a more transparent partnership for multilevel cooperation in fraud prevention than the Slovak ones, as evidenced by the training activities.

CONCLUSIONS

'Zero tolerance policy' applies to fraud affecting the EU budget (Kuhl 2020). Therefore, the fight against fraud is critical to protect the EU's financial interests, providing credibility and added value to EU-funded investments. In this regard, fraud prevention is essential to minimise the risk of potential damages to the EU budgetary resources. Within this context, this article investigated how two different MSs, Italy and Slovakia, fought fraud, via preventive measures, in CP investments. Empirical findings show that Italy and Slovakia

had both similarities and differences in their domestic anti-fraud measures. Notably, as demonstrated by numerous training activities guidelines, both countries took 'soft approaches' to clarify the relevant CP rules.

For policy practitioners, this article delivers some lessons. First, as our analysis showed, the domestic system of CP differs per country, which is determined, for instance, by the number of regions, the number of Operational Programmes, financial allocations, the division of responsibilities between national and sub-national authorities, and legal framework. These differences reflect on the fraud preventive measures since they have to be adjusted to 'the needs on the ground', i.e. the domestic circumstances of each MS. Therefore, the design of measures for tackling fraud should be aware that 'no-size-fits-all'. Second, the partnership principle serves as the guiding principle of CP. Thus, the active engagement of local and regional authorities and stakeholders in all stages of the CP 'life cycle' is crucial, from programming to evaluation. In line with this principle, different domestic actors, encompassing AFCOs partners, CP Funds beneficiaries and relevant stakeholders, should be involved in fighting fraud. Stakeholder involvement allows for exchanging information about good policy practices, which facilitates preventing fraud. Our findings show that peer-to-peer networking measures are important measures facilitating good practices of how to prevent fraud. Peer-to-peer should take place both domestically (among policy practitioners from different tiers of government) and among different MSs. Third, all EU countries must take an integrated approach, such as Arachne. The use of this IT analytical tool appears considerably diverse across MSs, as it is a voluntary instrument. Nonetheless, it does provide benefits for the users if integrated with the other factors. Therefore, for the next CP programming period, DG-REGIO and OLAF should ensure a more integrated approach to this tool in the Common Provision Regulation (CPR).

Finally, regarding the main limitations, this article focused on just two MSs, which were at the forefront of anti-fraud measures because of the adoption of the NAFS respectively. The question may arise about how other countries performed in fraud combat, especially among the primary CP beneficiaries, such as Poland and Spain. Second, the multiple checks and controls under the shared management undermine the possibility of conducting a proper statistical assessment. Therefore, more indicators might be used for a more detailed analysis. Indeed, this would require cautious assumptions to avoid the risk of drawing results on spurious correlations. Nonetheless, considering both qualitative and quantitative data presented, this article showed that both Italy and Slovakia could reduce the number of regularities by improving their financial compliance, thereby safeguarding the EU financial interests domestically. Lastly, the analysis did not cover the data on irregularities between 2019-2020. It stems from the reason that while the research for this article was carried out, the data from those three years had not been published yet.

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Research Article

Socialising the European Semester? The limited influence of Danish social partners on EU policymaking

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Abstract

Many scholars have debated the role of social policy in the new economic governance after the financial crisis and the sovereign debt crisis. While some researchers argue that social policy continues to be subordinated in favour of the economic imperative, others observe a partial but progressive socialisation, both in terms of EU policy outputs (i.e. more focus on social policies) and the governance procedure (i.e. more participation of social actors). This article contributes to this debate by providing a national perspective. Specifically, it investigates whether procedural socialisation at the national level leads to output socialisation at the EU level. Based on two case studies from Denmark during the European Semester, this article finds that despite their active participation, social partners have had no noticeable influence on the Commission's Country Reports or Country-Specific Recommendations. The results indicate that procedural socialisation may not easily translate into output socialisation. The article argues for more nuanced insights into the socialisation debate.

Keywords

Socialisation; European Semester; Social partners; Social policy; Denmark

After the financial crisis and the sovereign debt crisis, a new governance structure was set up in 2011 to coordinate European Union (EU) member states' social and economic policies. Known as the European Semester, this structure is a hybrid governance procedure integrating three pillars: the Stability and Growth Pact, the Macroeconomic Imbalance Procedure, and Europe 2020. Scholars have debated the role of social policy in the European Semester since its inception. For some scholars, the new economic governance entails a continual subordination of social policy to economic policies (Crespy and Menz 2015; Copeland and Daly 2018; 2015), and they argue that economic actors continue to dominate the procedure (de la Porte and Heins 2015; Dawson 2018; Baeten and Vanhercke 2017). Other scholars, however, see a partial but progressive socialisation of the European Semester (Zeitlin and Vanhercke 2018; 2014; Vanhercke, Zeitlin and Zwinkels 2015). This is manifested in two distinct dimensions, including output socialisation and procedural socialisation. The former denotes changes in terms of policy outputs, namely that there are more social policy focuses in EU guidelines and recommendations, while the latter describes improvements in terms of governance procedures, which are characterised by an increasingly active participation of EU social actors.

While these debates have generated valuable insights, they have focused primarily on the EU level with an emphasis on EU social policy actors, such as the Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion (DG EMPL), the Social Protection Committee (SPC) and the Employment Committee (EMCO) (Zeitlin and Vanhercke 2018; 2014; Vanhercke, Zeitlin and Zwinkels 2015; Crespy and Menz 2015; Copeland and Daly 2018; 2015). However, some scholars observe increasing social actor participation at the national level as well (Vanhercke, Zeitlin and Zwinkels 2015; Sabato and Vanhercke 2017), including efforts to influence EU policy outputs during the European Semester, such as trade unions (for example Tomev, Daskalova, Kostov, et al. 2019; Peña-Casas and Ghailani 2019; Pavolini and Natali 2019; Kraemer 2020). This leads to two interrelated questions: To what extent do national social actors influence EU policy outputs? Does procedural socialisation at the national level lead to output socialisation at the EU level?

To answer these questions, this study focuses on two salient and relevant issues for Danish social partners: shortage of skilled labour and inclusion of marginalised groups in the labour market. It considers Denmark as a most likely case among the member states to see the influence of national social partners on EU policy outputs, given their high organisational capacity and active participation (i.e. a high degree of procedural socialisation). However, the results of both case studies show that Danish social partners had no apparent influence on the EU policy outputs. On the issue of shortage of skilled labour, the employers' organisations failed to shape the contents of the Country Reports or to lobby the European Commission (hereafter referred to as the Commission) for a recommendation. For the issue of labour market inclusion of marginalised groups, the trade unions did not manage to influence the Commission's analysis in the Country Reports or to get a relevant recommendation on this issue.

This article makes the following contributions. First, a national perspective on socialisation complements previous EU-level studies. In general, rather than proving a link between the two dimensions of socialisation of the European Semester, this study finds the socialisation of governance procedures at the national level has not led to the socialisation of EU policy outputs. Second, both the focus on social partners and the finding of their limited influence also fit into an emerging research agenda on the involvement, more generally, of social actors in the European Semester (for example Sabato 2018; Perista and Perista 2019; Peña-Casas and Ghailani 2019; Pavolini and Natali 2019; Kraemer 2020; Kangas 2019; Jansson, Jansson and Ottosson 2019; Albert 2019). Methodologically, this study combines preference attainment and semi-structured interviews to measure the influence of Danish social partners, thus allowing us to gain greater clarity of the role of social partners in the European Semester.

This article is organised as follows. The next section introduces the European Semester and the debates over the role of social policy in the European Semester. Then, the research design and

the two Danish cases are briefly introduced. The bulk of the article is built around the detailed analysis of the cases, one from the employers' side (on the issue of shortage of skilled labour) and the other from the trade unions' side (on the issue of labour market inclusion of marginalised groups). The article closes with general conclusions and directions for future research.

THE SOCIALISATION OF THE EUROPEAN SEMESTER?

The European Semester began in 2011 as an annual cycle to coordinate member states' social and economic policies. It integrated three pillars into one hybrid governance system (van den Brink 2018): the Stability and Growth Pact and the Macroeconomic Imbalance Procedure, both of which contain binding obligations; and the non-binding Europe 2020. Each cycle begins in November with the Commission's Annual Growth Survey (AGS) (renamed Annual Sustainable Growth Strategy in 2020), which sets out the EU's general economic and social priorities for the following year.¹ In February, the Commission publishes a Country Report (CR) evaluation of each member state's progress during the European Semester. In April, the member states submit their structural and fiscal reform agendas to the Commission in the form of National Reform Programmes and Stability/Convergence Programmes, respectively. Accordingly, the Commission proposes Country-Specific Recommendations (CSRs) for each member state, which are revised and adopted by the Council of the European Union in July. Member states are obliged to implement these CSRs. AGS, CR and CSRs are policy outputs at the EU level, while National Reform Programmes and Stability/Convergence Programmes are policy outputs at the national level (Sabato 2018).²

Since its inception, scholars have debated the role of social policy during the European Semester. Many scholars argue that there is a continual subordination of social policies to economic policies (for example Dawson 2018; Crespy and Menz 2015; Copeland and Daly 2018; 2015). This subordination is manifested in two dimensions, namely the outputs of the European Semester and its governance procedure. First, EU policy outputs of the European Semester are often not socially-oriented. The political focus of the European Semester is on stringent economic policy and fiscal stability, thus the role of social policy is marginalised (Crespy and Menz 2015) or displaced (Dawson 2018). In general, structural reforms promoted in the European Semester consist of 'typically neoliberal policy recipes such as the liberalisation of products and services markets, the deregulation of labour markets, and public administration reform' (Crespy and Vanheuverzwijn 2019: 92). In addition, despite the increasing number of CSRs on social policy, they are more of a nature of market-making, rather than market-correcting (Copeland and Daly 2018). Social policies are largely dependent on economic policies and are bound by the straitjacket of promoting sound public finance (Copeland and Daly 2015). For instance, health CSRs 'tend to be framed in the discourse on sustainability of public finances rather than that of social inclusion with a predominant focus on the policy objective of sustainability' (Azzopardi-Muscat, Clemens, Stoner, et al. 2015: 375; see Baeten and Vanhercke 2017 for a similar finding).

Second, economic actors dominate the European Semester's governance procedure (Dawson 2018). The Directorate-General for Economic and Financial Affairs (DG ECFIN) and the Economic and Financial Affairs Council (ECOFIN) are endowed with more competences originated from the Stability and Growth Pact and the Macroeconomic Imbalance Procedure, while DG EMPL and the Employment, Social Policy, Health and Consumer Affairs Council (EPSCO) have a weaker legal basis from the non-binding Europe 2020 (de la Porte and Heins 2015). In addition, despite the increasing involvement of social actors, they are required to operate within the hierarchical and ideological confines of promoting fiscal stability and sustainability (Copeland and Daly 2018). Finally, economic actors have gained influence in some new sectors, such as the health sector (Földes 2016; Baeten and Vanhercke 2017).

In contrast to these views, however, other scholars propose that there has been a partial but gradual socialisation of the European Semester, both in terms of its policy outputs and its governance procedure (Zeitlin and Vanhercke 2018; 2014; Vanhercke, Zeitlin and Zwinkels 2015). More specifically, this socialisation comprises:

(1) a growing emphasis on social objectives in the Semester's policy orientations and messages, embodied in the AGS and especially the CSRs; (2) intensified monitoring, surveillance, and review of national reforms by EU social and employment policy actors and (3) an enhanced role for these actors relative to their economic policy counterparts in drafting, reviewing, and amending the CSRs (Zeitlin and Vanhercke 2018: 152).

In terms of policy outputs, policy orientations from 2012 and 2014 already saw an increasing focus on social policy, both in terms of incorporating social policy priorities in the AGS and in terms of the increasing number of CSRs on social policy (Zeitlin and Vanhercke 2018; 2014; Bekker 2014). In addition, this trend continued after the Juncker Commission, during which 'inclusive social and employment policy objectives figured even more prominently' in the AGS, and a stable proportion of CSRs continued to focus on social policy (Zeitlin and Vanhercke 2018: 163-164). Indeed, employment and wage policies are equally frequently addressed in CSRs and constitute the primary focus of the reforms promoted during the European Semester, just like budgetary policies (D'Erman, Haas, Schulz, et al. 2019).

In terms of the governance procedure, EU social actors play an increasingly important role. For instance, DG EMPL is able to play a bigger role in drafting the CR and proposing social CSRs. Indeed, it has greatly enhanced its analytical capacity to be able to provide evidence-based arguments to promote social policy (Savage and Verdun 2016). Similarly, the two advisory committees of the EPSCO Council, namely SPC and EMCO, are able to intensify multilateral surveillance and peer review in employment and social policies during the European Semester, provide more inputs to the adoption of social CSRs, and amend a few social CSRs despite the high threshold of Reversed Qualified Majority Voting and the 'comply or explain' rule (Zeitlin and Vanhercke 2018; 2014).

It seems that the disagreement over 'socialisation' arises partly from taking a macro (for example the overarching structure of the European Semester) or a micro (for example the CSRs, the actors) perspective. Studies with a macro perspective tend to find limited socialisation (for example de la Porte and Heins 2015; Dawson 2018; Copeland and Daly 2015), while research with a micro perspective is more likely to see a gradual development of socialisation (for example Zeitlin and Vanhercke 2018; 2014; D'Erman, Haas, Schulz, et al. 2019; Bekker 2014), or at least to take a more balanced view (for example Haas, D'Erman, Schulz, et al. 2020). Moreover, some studies focus on output socialisation (for example Haas, D'Erman, Schulz, et al. 2020; D'Erman, Haas, Schulz, et al. 2019; Bekker 2014; Azzopardi-Muscat, Clemens, Stoner, et al. 2015); some studies primarily investigate procedural socialisation (for example de la Porte and Heins 2015; Copeland and Daly 2015); while other studies look into both of them (for example Zeitlin and Vanhercke 2018; 2014; Copeland and Daly 2018). An investigation of both output and procedural socialisation seems to produce a more nuanced view. Indeed, the findings suggest that procedural socialisation is related to output socialisation. For Zeitlin and Vanhercke (2018: 168), the gradual output socialisation could partly 'be understood as the product of strategic agency, reflexive learning and creative adaptation by EU social and employment actors of their own organisation and practices in response to the new institutional conditions of the Semester'. Copeland and Daly (2018: 1014) hold a similar view, namely that:

[S]ocial actors have been able to advance EU social policy under relatively unfavourable conditions. The achievements have included the development of a stronger governance process for social policy, some strengthening of market-correcting CSRs and a greater mixing of market-correcting and market-making orientations in the CSRs.

However, most debates over the socialisation of the European Semester focus on the EU level (Zeitlin and Vanhercke 2018; 2014; Vanhercke, Zeitlin and Zwinkels 2015; Crespy and Menz 2015; Copeland and Daly 2018; 2015), examining the role of the main EU social actors, most prominently DG EMPL, SPC and EMCO. The increasing participation of social actors at the national level into the European Semester (Vanhercke, Zeitlin and Zwinkels 2015; Sabato 2018; Sabato and Vanhercke 2017) implies that national social actors may now be in a better position to influence the European Semester policy outputs at the EU level. This article investigates this potential influence in great depth.

Indeed, an emerging stream of research is starting to look into the role of national social partners during the European Semester. For example, the INVOTUNES project (Sabato 2018) looks into the role of national trade unions in the European Semester and their potential influence at the EU level across eight countries (Sabato 2018; Sabato and Vanhercke 2017; Perista and Perista 2019; Peña-Casas and Ghailani 2019; Pavolini and Natali 2019; Kraemer 2020; Kangas 2019; Albert 2019). They have shown that due to the extremely limited chance for trade unions to influence national policymaking during the European Semester (i.e. National Reform Programmes or legislation), they have increasingly turned to the EU, where they try to shape EU outputs such as CRs and CSRs (for example Tomev, Daskalova, Kostov, et al. 2019; Peña-Casas and Ghailani 2019; Pavolini and Natali 2019; Kraemer 2020).

This study follows this emerging research agenda and tries to complement previous studies in three ways. First, while they focus on trade unions, there is a need to investigate employers' organisations, as others have suggested that they have more ownership of the European Semester (Vanheuverzwijn and Crespy 2018). Second, previous studies have had difficulty establishing a convincing link between social partners and their influence on the EU outputs (for example Tomev, Daskalova, Kostov, et al. 2019; Perista and Perista 2019; Peña-Casas and Ghailani 2019; Albert 2019). This study combines preference attainment and semi-structured interviews to investigate the social partners' influence. Third, previous studies have omitted the case of Denmark, which is a most-likely case to test the influence of social partners on the EU policy outputs, as will be argued in the following section.

RESEARCH DESIGN

In this study, among EU member states, Denmark is considered a most-likely case at the country level for gauging the influence of national social partners on EU policy outputs (i.e. CRs and CSRs) for two reasons.³ First, Danish social partners have the capacity to participate and exert influence during the European Semester. In general, Denmark belongs to the Northern industrial relations cluster (together with Sweden, Finland and Norway), with both high employer organisation density and high trade union density. Many important labour market issues are governed by collective agreements. For instance, social partners exert strong influence over wage setting in Denmark, while many other EU countries have experienced a decline, including Finland and Sweden (Eurofound 2015: 16-17). As Table 1 shows, 68.5 per cent of the total Danish workforce are union members, and the trade union density in Denmark is the highest in the EU despite a decrease since the late 1990s. On the employees' side, specialised trade unions combine into confederations, with Danish Confederation of Trade Unions (FH; previously called LO), the Confederation of Professionals in Denmark (FTF), and the Danish Confederation of Professional Associations (AC) being the largest three. The largest single trade union, the United Federation of Danish Workers (3F), represented 272,628 members in 2019. On the employers'

side in the private sector, the three main employers' confederations are the Confederation of Danish Employers (DA), the Danish Employers' Association for the Financial Sector (FA), and the Danish Confederation of Employers' Association in Agriculture (SALA) (Jensen 2012). The biggest single employers' organisation is Dansk Industri (DI) with 11,000 member companies.

Table 1: Employer organisations and trade union density since the late 1990s

	Employer organisation density (%)			Trade union density (%)		
	1997–1999	2011–2013	Trend	1997–1999	2011–2013	Trend
Austria	100	100	Stable	39.8	27.8	Decline
Belgium	82	82	Stable	55.6	50.4	Decline
Bulgaria	(---)	55	---	39.2	19.8	Decline (>50%)
Cyprus	60	62.5	Increase	70	49	Decline
Czech Republic	---	35%	---	36.9	17.3	Decline (>50%)
Denmark	58	65	Increase	75.6	68.5	Decline
Estonia	> 35	23.8	Decline	>20	8.1	Decline (>50%)
Germany	> 60	< 60	Decline	27	18	Decline
Greece	---	43.7	---	29.8	25.4	Decline
Finland	---	72.7	---	79.4	69	Decline
France	74	75	Stable	8.4	7.9	Decline
Hungary	---	40	---	35.3	16.8	Decline (>50%)
Ireland	---	60	---	45.2	36.1	Decline
Italy	> 62	58	Decline	36.2	35.2	Stable
Latvia	---	35	---	>25	14.8	Decline
Lithuania	---	< 14	---	30	10	---
Luxembourg	80	80	Stable	42.4	37.3	Decline
Malta	---	60	---	62.8	48.6	Decline
Netherlands	85	85	Stable	24.4	19	Decline
Norway	55	65	Increase	55.5	54.6	Stable
Poland	---	20	---	20.5	14.1	Decline (>40%)
Portugal	< 60	65	Increase	25.2	19.3	Decline
Romania	> 80	< 60	Decline	>45	32.8	Decline
Slovakia	> 33	< 29	Decline	42	16.7	Decline (>40%)
Slovenia	100	55	Decline	44.1	24.4	Decline (>40%)
Spain	72	75	Increase	15.6	15.6	Stable
Sweden	> 83	< 83	Decline	82	68	Decline
UK	> 40	<35	Decline	31.9	27.1	Decline

Source: ICTWSS 4.0, April 2013, from Eurofound (2015: 67).

Second, during a round of exploratory interviews conducted in 2018, almost all interviewees – from employer and employee groups as well as the Commission itself – have described social partners as actively engaged with the Commission and interested in the European Semester (interview 1; 2; 3; 4; 5; 6; 7; 8; 9; 10). This is in sharp contrast to, for instance, Swedish social partners, who have been found to be much less active and interested in the European Semester (Jansson, Jansson and Ottosson 2019). Still, this attitude is more similar to the one held by the Finnish trade unions, which frequently use the 'Brussels way' to get their voices heard in the European Semester and even established their own lobbying organisation (FinUnions) in Brussels (Kangas 2019: 15). Moreover, since 2015 Denmark has received most recommendations on its

productivity issue and no social recommendations (at least until 2019), while Finland has continued to receive recommendations on social policies. This situation has created a window of opportunity for the social partners to lobby for their preferred social CSRs for Denmark (see Appendix 1 for all the CSRs for Denmark from 2015 to 2019). Indeed, as one interviewee put it, ‘because of the lack of recommendations on the labour market issue, we think we can use it in our lobbying activities’ (interview 7). While CSRs face significant implementation challenges across the EU, Denmark had the highest average implementation score (67) between 2011 and 2017 (Efsthathiou and Wolff 2018: 6). This might have made social partners believe that even non-binding CSRs from the EU could generate significant influence in Denmark.

In order to investigate the role of social partners in Denmark, this article selects two cases from the period of 2015 to 2019.⁴ The two cases are selected based on its salience and relevance for the social partners.⁵ An issue is considered as salient if the CR highlights it as a challenge. The relevance of the issue to a social partner was identified during the exploratory interviews. Based on those two criteria, two issues have been selected. One is the shortage of skilled labour, which CRs repeatedly highlight as a challenge. This issue is of special concern to employers, as it affects companies that need skilled labour. The other issue is the labour market inclusion of marginalised groups, which many CRs have also mentioned as a challenge. The trade unions have a focus on this issue, as it concerns vulnerable groups in the labour market. The Danish economy recovered relatively fast from the crises, and Denmark was out of the Excessive Deficit Procedure in 2014. In fact, the Danish economic situation was so good that, together with Sweden, it has received the least number of CSRs among the member states since 2015. Therefore, due to the favourable economic conditions, neither issue was considered a political priority in Denmark. Still, the Danish government has made several active labour market policy reforms to address them. For the issue of shortage of skilled labour, the Danish government has made an effort to improve the quality and attractiveness of vocational education and training and ensure that workers have the right composition of skills to meet demand. In order to help marginalised group in the labour market, the Danish government has provided more individual support for the unemployed and the vulnerable, combined with stronger economic incentives to work. Table 2 shows all the issues highlighted for Denmark from 2015 to 2019. It is clear that those two were the most frequently mentioned social policy issues for Denmark.

Table 2: Challenges for Denmark identified in the Country Report from 2015 to 2019

Challenges identified in CRs
Productivity growth and competition (2015-2019).
Labour market inclusion of marginalised groups (2015-2019).
Shortage of skilled labour (2017-2019).
Housing market and household debt (2017-2019).
Vocational education (2015-2016).
Cooperation between universities and business (2015-2016).
Educational outcome of students with a migrant background (2017).
Scaling up of start-ups (2017).

Source: European Commission, Country Report Denmark from 2015-2019

To analyse the shortage of skilled labour issue, this study looked into the activities of DA, the largest employer’s confederation, and DI, the largest employers’ organisation. For the second case, i.e. marginalised groups in the labour market, it focused on FH, the biggest trade union confederation, and 3F, the biggest trade union in Denmark. In general, DA and DI work closely together during the European Semester. This is also the case for FH and 3F.

In this article, influence is understood as ‘the ability of an actor to shape a political decision in line with his preferences’ (Dür 2008: 561). In order to measure influence, preference attainment and semi-structured interviews were employed. The method of preference attainment compares

the outcomes of political processes with the ideal points of actors. The most basic idea is that the distance between an outcome and the ideal point of an actor reflects the influence of this actor (Dür 2008: 566). Accordingly, influence is measured in two stages. First, a preference attainment approach was used to assess the extent to which the opinions of social partners on those two issues are in line with the Commission's CRs and the CSRs. In order to identify the preferences of the social partners, two kinds of position papers were collected from interviewees. One is the comments on the National Reform Programme, which social partners send to the government each year (five documents from DA and DI, three documents from FH and 3F), and the other is the proposals for new CSRs that social partners send to their EU-level social partners, namely Business Europe and the European Trade Union Confederation (one document from DA and DI, and one from FH and 3F).⁶ The coding book for preference attainment can be found in Table 3. Second, to further detect the social partners' perceived influence on the issue, in-depth interviews were conducted with key actors. This article is based on 20 interviews conducted in two rounds between February 2018 and September 2019. The interviewees are the key actors in the European Semester: the main social partners, Danish civil servants, country teams from the Commission, and so on. The interviews conducted are listed in the end, providing an overview of which organisations were interviewed and when.

Table 3: Coding book for preference attainment

Issue	Actors	Position papers of the actors	Preference attainment at the CR level	Preference attainment at the CSR level
Shortage of skilled labour	Employers' organisations (DA and DI)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Comments on the National Reform Programme (DI 2015; 2016; 2017; DA, 2019) Proposal for CSRs sent to Business Europe (DA and DI, 2018; 2019) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Low degree of attainment: The CR doesn't highlight or only briefly mentions the issue as a challenge. Middle degree of attainment: The CR highlights the issue as a challenge, but frames it differently from the actor. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Low degree of attainment: The CSR doesn't mention the issue or only indirectly mentions the issue. Middle degree of attainment: The CSR directly mentions the issue but with different focuses from the actor.
Labour market inclusion of marginalised groups	Trade unions (FH and 3F)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Comments on the National Reform Programme (FH, 2016; 2017; 2019) Proposal for CSRs sent to European Trade Union Confederation (FH and 3F, 2019) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> High degree of attainment: The CR highlights the issue as a challenge and is in complete agreement with the actor. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> High degree of attainment: The CSR directly mentions the issue and is in complete agreement with the actor.

CASE ONE: THE SHORTAGE OF SKILLED LABOUR ISSUE

Preference Attainment of Employers' Organisations on this Issue

Both DA and DI consider the shortage of skilled labour in Denmark a serious concern, and both want the Commission to focus on this issue in CRs and eventually formulate a CSR for Denmark. Both criticise the Danish government for lacking policies that facilitate the recruitment of skilled employees (documents from DA 2019; DI, 2015; 2016; 2017). In preparation for the 2019 European Semester, DA and DI jointly urged the Commission to propose a CSR that would recommend 'national initiatives to address and prevent labour shortage through easier access, less red tape and initiatives to facilitate recruitment for qualified foreign workers and through initiatives to increase the number of skilled workers' (document from DA and DI 2019). Interestingly, trade unions disagree with DA and DI. They acknowledge labour shortage in some very specific sectors, but they do not consider this a general problem across the board (interview 16; 17). This view is similar to the government's (interview 18).

From the Commission's side, the shortage of skilled labour was first identified as a challenge in its 2017 CR, which pointed out that 'there is a shortage of labour for certain types of workers' (European Commission 2017: 2). Again in 2018 it was argued that 'shortages of skilled labour in certain sectors constitute a significant challenge' (European Commission 2018: 2). And in 2019 the Commission concluded that 'employment growth has been solid, but challenges persist... companies continue to report increasing shortages of skilled workers' (European Commission 2019: 4). As such, the Commission does recognise the problem of shortage of skilled workers in Denmark. However, it does not agree with the employers that labour shortage is a general phenomenon. The inputs from the trade unions and the Danish government seem to have convinced the Commission that the shortage of skilled labour is specific to sectors such as construction, information and communication technology, and services. Thus, for DA and DI there is a middle level of preference attainment in the CR.⁷

As for the CSRs from 2015 and 2019, only one touched upon the labour market issue. In 2019, the first CSR to Denmark was: 'focus investment-related economic policy on education and skills, research and innovation to broaden the innovation base to include more companies, and on sustainable transport to tackle road congestion' (Council of the European Union 2019). The accompanying recital argued that 'ensuring the supply of labour in times of demographic and technological changes and addressing labour shortage, in particular of skilled workers and ICT specialists, is key to fostering sustainable and inclusive growth in Denmark' (Council of the European Union 2019). However, while the CSR highlighted the issue of education and skills, which may help to increase the number of skilled workers, it did not mention the issue of labour shortage directly. Therefore, measured against their proposals, DA and DI achieved a low degree of preference attainment in the CSR.

Employer Organisations' Perceived Influence on Crs and Csrs

The first stage of analysis of preference attainment seems to indicate some influence of the employers' organisations on the Commission, as the CR reflects their preferences to a middle degree, although the same cannot be said of the CSR. However, follow-up interviews with key actors do not find support for such influence.

First, at the CR level, there is no solid evidence that DA or DI pushed the Commission to focus on the issue of shortage of skilled labour. DA does think the CR serves their interests to some extent, but they do not think their considerable efforts have led to positive changes in the CR (interview 15). An interviewee from the Commission agreed: 'because it was a very positive thing that the economy has gone so well. The unemployment rate has dropped, so the issue has been brought up by more and more reports' (interview 14). Therefore, the reason for the Commission's focus is not the lobbying efforts of DA (also on behalf of DI). Instead, it is an issue that was naturally picked up by the Commission as it appeared more in reports.

Second, at the CSR level, there is no evidence of influence. Employers consider the 2019 CSR to be too indirect to be useful (interview 15), although investment in education and skills may increase the number of skilled workers in the long term. Therefore, this CSR was not considered relevant to issues employers would like to see action on, and they judge their efforts to push for a meaningful CSR to have failed (interview 15). From the Commission's side, it is clear that the reason for issuing the CSR on education and skills had nothing to do with the efforts from the employers. Instead, it is mainly the Commission's own initiative, with a focus on investment needs in the EU. Through this CSR, the Commission wanted to foster national ownership of the Multiannual Financial Framework, especially the European Social Fund, and thus almost all member states received a similar CSR on investment in education and skills in 2019 (interview 14; 19; 20).

Case Assessment

In this case, although preference attainment suggests some influence from DA and DI, later investigation does not provide any support. Why do DA and DI fail to influence the Commission, despite their efforts to lobby? There are several reasons. First, the Commission also listens to the trade unions and the government's opinions on this issue, and there is significant disagreement. Both FH and 3F are against the idea of having a CSR on this issue, as they find claims of labour shortage to be exaggerated (interview 16; 17). The same view is held by the government (interview 18). There is, in short, no consensus on this issue. Moreover, the Commission is well aware that this is a 'hot potato' (interview, 12; 14), as the issue of shortage of skilled labour is linked to a bigger debate in Denmark about the threshold for recruiting third-country migrant workers. On the one hand, the right-wing parties and employers want to make it much easier to recruit workers from outside the EU. On the other hand, the left-wing parties and trade unions want to maintain and even raise the threshold in order to protect the wages and working conditions of the domestic labour force (interview 14; 18; 19). Third, the Commission is bound to ensure that its CSRs do not bias against member states. Indicators at the EU level show that the skilled labour problem is no more severe in Denmark than in other countries, so issuing a CSR on the issue only to Denmark could be interpreted as inappropriate bias. In addition, the government is already taking initiatives to deal with this issue (interview 14; 19). Therefore, no consensus, sensitivity, and horizontal consistency (i.e. the relatively good performance of Denmark among all the EU countries) all play a role in the Commission's decision not to issue a CSR on this issue for Denmark. In the end, these are the reasons why DA and DI have not realised their preferences through the European Semester.

CASE TWO: LABOUR MARKET INCLUSION OF MARGINALISED GROUPS

Preference Attainment of Trade Unions on this Issue

Both FH and 3F are concerned about this issue. One interviewee summed up the general impression: 'it's a matter of fact that we are not good at including marginalised groups in the labour market' (interview 16). They frequently argue that there are still many vulnerable groups, such as those who are not able to work to get social benefits (document from FH 2016), old workers (document from FH 2018), and the unemployed and refugees (document from FH 2019). In 2019, they proposed the following as a CSR:

Denmark should take measures to integrate people on the margins of the labour market into employment. This includes vulnerable groups such as immigrants, young (marginalised) people and people with disabilities. With the current low unemployment rates, the time is ideal to address this issue by strengthening skills development and continuous education and training for these groups (FH document 2019).

Employers agree that this is an important issue, but they do not think the right way to deal with this is to invest more in education or training. Rather, they propose increases in the economic incentives to work (such as reducing social benefits) (interview 18).

In the CRs, the trade unions have achieved a high level of preference attainment. Each CR since 2015 has identified labour market inclusion of marginalised groups as a challenge, and the needs of groups such as low-skilled, old workers, young people, and migrants from outside the EU have been emphasised (European Commission 2018a: 3; 2017: 2; 2016: 2; 2015: 1). In 2019 it was observed that 'another challenge is to increase the employability of vulnerable groups, such as those with a migrant background, young people and people with disabilities who are less able to work' (European Commission 2019: 5).

At the level of CSRs, however, trade union preferences were weakly reflected. No relevant CSR was issued from 2015 to 2018 although this issue was mentioned in some recitals. By contrast, the 2019 CSR on investment in education and skills that was at the heart of the analysis of the first case above can also be regarded as a way to address the issue of labour market inclusion, because both FH and 3F consider education as one of the best ways to integrate marginalised groups. Further, the Commission's accompanying recital mentioned that 'it would be beneficial to focus on a better integration of marginalised and disadvantaged groups on the labour market' (Council of the European Union 2019). However, while this CSR highlighted the issue of education and skills, it did not directly point to the marginalised groups in the labour market. Therefore, trade unions only obtained a low degree of preference at the CSR level.

Trade Unions' Perceived Influence on the CR and the CSR

The first stage of analysis suggests a high level of preference attainment at the CR level and a low degree at the CSR level. Follow-up interviews show that trade unions do not have any influence at either level.

In terms of the CR, both the trade unions and the Commission deny the existence of any trade union influence on the Commission's analysis. FH acknowledges that it has failed to influence the substance of CRs so far (interview 17). Similarly, 3F struggles to identify evidence where they might have influenced the Commission's analysis (interview 16). From the Commission's side, DG EMPL chose to focus on the issue of labour market inclusion for reasons unrelated to the push from FH (interview 19). More specifically, the trade unions played more of a role of confirmation, rather than setting the agenda. As the interviewee states:

Of course, domestic actors, they influence. But they more of confirm, I must say. Because we do a lot of research here. We look at all kinds of reports, all kinds of sources... People like DA or FH, of course they can also provide some statistics that we can use, but I think influence is a big word. We take a lot of decisions ourselves (interview 19).

At the CSR level, FH does not consider the CSR on education and skills to be the Commission's response to their needs (interview 17). Indeed, FH understands the 2019 CSR much in line with the Commission's explanation, namely that this CSR was an initiative from the Commission side to all the member states to foster national ownership of the European Social Fund. In a word, there is no evidence of influence from the trade unions on the CSR.

Case Assessment

In short, although preference attainment indicates some influence from the trade unions on the Commission, later interviews do not provide support for this. Still, what are the reasons behind this failure? First, perhaps very different from the issue of shortage of skilled labour, FH and 3F did not actively push for a CSR on the issue of marginalised labourers as the employers' organisations did. As one interviewee describes: 'if we ask them, if you were to pick a CSR, what

would you pick? And they would say, of course, marginalised group ... but they are not doing it with a pushy strategy like DA' (interview 19). Indeed, trade unions believe it is better to engage directly with the government through social dialogue in terms of labour market reforms (interview 16; 17). However, they recognise that it is important to influence the CR and the CSRs (interview 17). If the current government does not make progress on this issue, then they intend to push the Commission more for a CSR on this issue (interview 16).

From the Commission's perspective, there are several reasons why a CSR to Denmark on this issue would not be appropriate. First, problems associated with marginalised labourers are more serious in other member states. As shown in the Social Scoreboard (European Commission 2018b), Denmark performs well among the EU countries, thus it is not relevant from a horizontal perspective. Second, it is difficult to introduce a new CSR within the current Commission's evidence-based approach. As interviewees explained it, one needs to present a lot of evidence before the Commission is convinced to introduce a new CSR (interview 14; 19; 20). At least two criteria must be met before a new CSR is issued: the substantive concern must be a major issue, and the government must be unaware of the issue or have approached it in a way the Commission considers to be counterproductive. However, in the case of Denmark, the government is aware of this issue and is taking a lot of initiatives, so it is hard for the Commission to introduce a CSR. Third, the issue itself is hard to pin down in terms of concrete, implementable policy suggestions. These marginalised people consist of different groups from different backgrounds, and a single policy recommendation is unlikely to serve all of them (interview 14; 19). Lastly, this issue is also related to the debate about the shortage of skilled labour, as FH and 3F believe that one should help marginalised groups who need training and education, before one can open the borders to labourers from third countries (interview 16; 17). Therefore, this again is linked to the bigger political debate about the threshold of recruiting third-country labourers. Thus, horizontal consistency, severity, feasibility, and sensitivity all contribute to no CSR initiatives being related to Denmark's marginalised groups.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

After the financial and the sovereign debt crises, the European Semester was founded to coordinate the social and economic policies of EU member states. A major debate revolves around the role of social policy in the new governance architecture. While some scholars believe there is continual subordination of social policy to the economic imperative, others argue that there is a partial but progressive socialisation of the European Semester in terms of policy outputs and the governance procedure. As fruitful as these debates have been, they have paid little attention to national level social actors. Since national social actors, such as social partners, are increasingly participating in the European Semester, there is a need to understand whether participation of national social partners has any potential to lead to policy changes at the EU level. To answer this question, this study analysed Denmark as a most likely case at the country level to see social partners' influence. Two case studies were conducted: one on the issue of shortage of skilled labour and the other on the labour market inclusion of marginalised groups.

The findings indicate that despite the active participation from the social partners, they have had no noticeable influence on the CRs and the CSRs. While a preference attainment approach indicates that both employers' organisations and the trade unions have had some influence on the Commission, follow-up interviews demonstrate that social partners' influence remains extremely limited. And the Commission is in firm control of writing analysis in CRs and proposing CSRs, whereas the social partners seem unable to influence the Commission. Importantly, the Commission was acutely aware that both issues were 'hot potatoes' with little consensus at the time. It thus acted rationally and strategically by keeping the debate alive at the technical level through its CRs, while staying away from further politicisation by proposing relevant CSRs. This shows active 'politicisation management' (Schimmelfennig 2020) from the Commission to depoliticise issues with high risks that might backfire. In the case of Denmark, the Commission

acts as the 'guardian of the markets' (Van der Veer and Haverland 2018) and issues CSRs for which it has stronger mandate, such as those on productivity growth and competition.

The findings suggest that procedural socialisation at the national level, namely more active participation of social actors, does not necessarily lead to output socialisation at the EU level. This reveals a nuanced picture of the debate on the socialisation of the European Semester. Indeed, instead of an interaction between the two dimensions of socialisation, procedural socialisation and output socialisation may go on parallel. On the one hand, national social partners participate more actively in the European Semester. On the other hand, the Commission is still in firm control of the policy outputs, pushing for a social Europe largely based on its own assessment. Therefore, irrespective of the procedural socialisation at the national level, the EU policy outputs may be less social (as shown in this article), or more social (for example Zeitlin and Vanhercke 2018; 2014) at the same time.

To some extent, this article speaks to both sides of the debate over the role of social policy during the European Semester. For critics, it does find that national social partners are actively involved procedurally. For proponents, it presents challenges for developing more EU-level social policy outputs. Therefore, this article does not side with either camp. Instead, it argues for more nuanced insights into different dimensions of socialisation that involve actors from different levels of the EU multilevel governance. For example, by investigating the 'policy direction' implied in the CSRs, Haas, D'Erman, Schulz and Verdun (2020: 338-339) create a nuanced picture of the European Semester, reflecting neither a 'neoliberal EU' nor a 'Social Europe'. While the EU's recommendations tend to recommend reducing public spending, they also encourage more social protection for vulnerable groups. As such, there is no progressive 'socialisation' of the European Semester. Instead, CSRs promoting social protection have been a significant part of the European Semester since 2012, and their share of all recommendations has remained nearly constant.

More broadly, findings from this article could be linked to the ownership concept in the European Semester, which has received much attention and is promoted by many EU institutions. Ownership can be conceptualised as institutional ownership, political ownership, and cognitive ownership.

Institutional ownership refers to the capacity of a certain actor to control the process and shape its outputs. Political ownership means that national actors accept and agree with the policy objectives promoted in the framework of the Semester and thus are more proactive in fostering implementation. Cognitive ownership is a thinner type whereby actors are aware of the Semester, know how it works, and have integrated it into their daily routine. (Vanheuverzwijn and Crespy 2018: 590)

In the two Danish cases, social partners do seem to have a high level of political ownership (i.e. they agree with many objectives in the European Semester), and cognitive ownership (i.e. they have a high awareness of the European Semester). However, there is indeed a very low level of institutional ownership (i.e. they fail to influence CRs or CSRs). Therefore, there seems to be a long way to go to be able to meaningfully enhance institutional ownership of social partners during the European Semester.

Lastly, this study has only focused on social partners, but at the national level there are other important social actors during the European Semester. For example, ministries in charge of employment or social affairs as well as social non-government organisations are also actively involved in the European Semester. Therefore, future studies can investigate the potential of their participation to influence the EU social policy during the European Semester.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ Annual Growth Survey is accompanied by the Alert Mechanism Report, which monitors macroeconomic indicators across the member states.
- ² Sabato (2018) actually treats the CSRs as outcomes instead of outputs. This study considers outputs as policy contents, and outcomes as behavioural changes in the target population, such as the income level. Thus, CSRs are considered as outputs instead of outcomes.
- ³ This study follows Sabato's (2018) research design and focuses on CR and CSRs, excluding AGS.
- ⁴ Before the Juncker Commission, social partners' participation was extremely limited (Sabato 2018; Sabato and Vanhercke 2017).
- ⁵ However, those two cases may not be considered as 'most-likely cases' as shown later.
- ⁶ Another ideal position paper is the comments that social partners on the CR. However, only 3F provided this material for the author. Still, comments on the National Reform Programmes were often described by interviewees as presenting and repeating their positions, so they should be valid proxy for their preferences.
- ⁷ This is in line with the assessment that DA and DI sent to Business Europe on the European Semester in 2019, in which they admitted that 'the European Commission recognizes the beginning of labour shortages in particular areas'. But they also argued that '[t]he Commission needs to set more focus on the problems on the Danish labour market with weak growth and that, in spite of the weak growth an increasing challenge of growing labour shortages' (document from DA and DI 2019).

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INTERVIEWS

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- 4 European Commission, DG ECFIN, Brussels, March 2018.
- 5 European Commission, DG EMPL, Brussels, March 2018.
- 6 European Commission, Secretary General (SG), Brussels, March 2018.
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- 11 Danish Parliament, Copenhagen, June 2018.
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APPENDIX 1: CSRS FOR DENMARK FROM 2015 TO 2019

Year	CSRs
2015	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Avoid deviating from the medium-term budgetary objective in 2016. 2. Enhance productivity, in particular in the services sectors oriented towards the domestic market, including retail and construction. Ease the restrictions on retail establishments and take further measures to remove remaining barriers posed by authorisation and certification schemes in the construction sector.
2016	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Respect the medium-term budgetary objective in 2016 and achieve an annual fiscal adjustment of 0,25 % of GDP towards the medium-term budgetary objective in 2017. 2. Enhance productivity and private sector investment by increasing competition in the domestic services sector, in particular by facilitating market entry in retail and construction. Incentivise the cooperation between businesses and universities.
2017	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Foster competition in the domestically oriented services sector.
2018	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Increase competition in domestically oriented services sectors, for instance in the distribution of utilities and in the financial sector.
2019	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Focus investment-related economic policy on education and skills, research and innovation to broaden the innovation base to include more companies, and on sustainable transport to tackle road congestion. 2. Ensure effective supervision and the enforcement of the anti-money-laundering framework.

Source: https://ec.europa.eu/info/publications/2019-european-semester-country-specific-recommendations-council_en; https://ec.europa.eu/info/archive-european-semester-documents-denmark_en.

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Research Article

The Inconsistency of Czech Presidential Diplomacy and the Growth of Czech Foreign Trade with China

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Abstract

This paper analyzes the relation between the diplomatic activity of Czech presidents and the economic trend of bilateral trade between the Czech Republic and China during 1993-2019. The investigation is based on a statistical survey of diplomatic steps and economic figures. Although the policy of the first Czech President Václav Havel (1993-2003) was cautious towards China, Czech-Chinese bilateral trade exchange was nevertheless consistent and relatively balanced. In the period of President Václav Klaus (2003-2013), after the accession of the Czech Republic to the EU, the trend of trade balance continued to the detriment of Czech exports despite the trade volume growth. However, the decline of exports to China was similarly observed in other Central European countries. That was also a period when Czech presidential diplomatic acts towards China became more numerous. In the period of President Miloš Zeman (2013-until now), the diplomatic activity of the Czech President increased significantly according to the number of official visits and signed documents. Simultaneously, there has been a significant decline in Czech exports and Chinese reinvested profits in the Czech Republic. The authors substantiate the findings by quantitative analysis and describe the development of Czech presidential diplomacy from the perspective of Czech-Chinese economic relations during 1993-2019 as inconsistent.

Keywords

Presidential diplomacy; Václav Havel; Václav Klaus; Miloš Zeman; Czech-China international relations

INTRODUCTION

As a result of intensifying economic and political relations in recent years between the People's Republic of China (next as China) and Visegrad group countries and Central and Eastern Europe in general, several studies dealing with this topic have emerged; for example Semerák (2012), Fojtíková et al. (2017), Vlčková (2017), or Krejčí (2019). Kopecký et al. (2016) and Li (2017) analyse the impact of the Belt and Road Initiative and the 17+1 platform bringing together China with the 17 countries of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). The number of specific studies focusing on Czech-Chinese relations is also growing. Czech-Chinese trade and investment are analysed in papers of Fürst and Pleschová (2010), De Castro and Stuchlíková (2014), McCaleb and Szunomár (2017), De Castro et al. (2017), Fojtíková and Meng (2018). The political ties between the Czech Republic and China and their influence on mutual relations are then discussed by for example Fürst and Tesař (2013), Maher (2016), Karásková et al. (2018), Bajerová and Turcsányi (2019), Čuhlová (2019), and Turcsányi and Qiaoan (2019).

The EU approach towards China has been rather inconsistent and reactive for years (Maher, 2016) which is why the EU member states, including the Czech Republic, are often keen on developing relations with China individually. It is however important to point out that the EU's perception of China is developing, especially recently when boosting resilience can be observed. The change has been also demonstrated by reference to China as "a negotiation partner, an economic competitor and a systemic rival", which continues to define European China policy (European Commission 2019).

At present, there are few studies investigating the impact of Czech political orientation on Czech-Chinese trade and investment. Fürst and Pleschová (2010) state that there is a lack of clear evidence supporting the statement that a non-confrontationist Czech foreign policy towards China brings more benefits than a policy including human rights criticism support for Taiwanese and Tibetan claims. As Čuhlová (2019) continues, human rights are primarily negotiated on the EU level. Despite the occasional criticism from the Czech side, the effect of such a policy on bilateral economic relations with China was not significant nor damaging.

According to Fürst and Pleschová (2010), the Czech strategy of frequent visits aims to win China's favour. Table 1 lists the official visits of the five high-ranking officials from the Czech Republic and China. Namely, the President, the Vice President, the Prime Minister, the Deputy Prime Minister, and the Minister of Foreign Affairs are included. Meetings between the Czech and Chinese politicians taking place in third countries are excluded. The increasing number of delegations on both sides is notable, especially when taking into account the mutual proportions and capacities of both countries.

According to De Castro et al. (2017), a higher frequency of official visits demonstrates the evolution of positive political attitude towards China. As De Castro et al. (2017) state, political support is a suitable factor for enhancing economic activities. In the view of Karásková et al. (2018), current president Zeman stands for the most pro-Chinese voice in the Czech public discourse and the most influential resulting from his position. In July 2021, the Zeman's Presidential Office announced its sixth visit in China in 2022.

Table 1: Overview of the development of the Czech-Chinese diplomatic relations: official visits of the five-ranking officials

Presidency	Czech Delegations in China	Chinese Delegations in the Czech Republic
Václav Havel (1993-2003)	1994 - Prime Minister (Klaus) 1999 - Prime Minister (Zeman)	Ministerial meetings or meetings with Chinese embassy representatives (endnote 1)
Václav Klaus (2003-2013)	2004 - Presidents 2005 - Prime Minister	2005 - Prime Minister 2009 - Prime Minister
Miloš Zeman (2013- nowadays)	2014 - Minister of Foreign Affairs 2014 - President 2015 - Prime Minister 2015 - Chairman of the Czech Parliament 2015 - President 2016 - Prime Minister 2017 - President 2018 - President 2019 - President	2014 - Vice Premier 2015 - Vice Premier 2015 - Minister of Foreign Affairs 2016 - President 2018 - Vice Premier

Source: Own processing

The presented paper offers a different view on the economic diplomacy of Czech relations towards China with a link of the presidentship of three presidents: Václav Havel (1989-2003), Václav Klaus (2003-2013) and Miloš Zeman (since 2013 - until now). This article aims to compare the approaches of Czech presidential diplomacy as one of the aspects of the whole bilateral economic relationship. The political strategies are presented from the perspective of economic diplomacy based on factors such as improvement of bilateral trade balance in favour of the Czech economy, support of Czech exports to China. They guarantee the quality of Chinese investments in the Czech Republic.

The Czech Republic is a parliamentary democracy, where the government's foreign policy is represented by the Prime Minister, possibly the Foreign Minister, or a minister responsible for a particular area. However, in the Czech situation, the character of the President position has played a considerable role in political affairs and public opinion as a non-partisan spokesperson of citizens and as a contra-balance power to the government. The President's position strengthened by the Czech direct presidential election in 2013 (Hloušek 2014). The President is not the only major figure in foreign policy and diplomacy in the Czech Republic. Czech foreign policy is represented by the Minister of Foreign Affairs and the Prime Minister. However, the Czech President is also a foreign policy figure, not directly depending on the current Czech internal political scene (Smolík - Hloušek, 2019). The Constitution of the Czech Republic defines presidential foreign policy powers. The President's decision must be countersigned by the Prime Minister or an authorized member of the government (Constitutional Law No. 1 / 1993 Coll. Art. 63, Title 4). The government takes political responsibility for the decisions taken. At the same time, the President of the Republic shall furthermore "represent the state abroad" (Constitutional Law No. 1 / 1993 Coll., Art. 63, Title 1a) therefore the President has an opportunity not only to copy with the Czech government but also to intervene in foreign policy. The President can pursue an

independent government policy, for example, in the form of public speeches, foreign visits, and meeting political persons.

The research questions addressed in the paper examine whether the Czech presidential diplomatic activities have:

- i. a positive direct effect on the annual growth of mutual trade,
- ii. a positive direct effect on Czech exports,
- iii. a positive direct effect on the growth of reinvested Chinese profit in the Czech Republic.

The article follows the analysis and interpretation of economic statistics on Czech-China relations. The term "presidential diplomacy" refers to the activities that arise from the political strategy that the Czech president represents. It could be claimed that Czech presidents often formed different attitudes towards China than the Czech government (e.g., double-track policy). Therefore, the term "presidential diplomacy" does not automatically refer to Czech diplomacy as a whole.

CZECH-CHINESE ECONOMIC RELATION

Despite the asymmetric size of economies, the Czech Republic is being considered by China as an essential partner in its "Going Global" strategy and hopes to enter the European market through cooperation (Li 2017). Overview of the economic relations between the Czech Republic and China can be analyzed based on a combination of data on Chinese outward investment and bilateral trade balance.

Investment Engagement

Although the Czech Republic has been recognized as very successful in attracting foreign capital among CEE countries encouraged by the Czech government investment incentive system since opening its borders in 1989, the number of Chinese investors in the Czech Republic was rather negligible before 2012 (McCaleb - Szunomár 2017). After that, the relation had been strengthened due to the new Czech government and the President, new Chinese strategic initiatives, especially after President Xi Jinping's visit to Prague, which led to the rise of Chinese investment. In 2016 President Zeman announced that investment from China was about to reach 2 billion USD, which was unprecedented on the market of the Czech size (Czech News Agency 2016). However, as recorded by the Czech Central Bank, the actual amount of inward Chinese investment was only 750 million USD, and in 2017 it was even less than that (Klímová 2018).

The most prominent Chinese investor has been the private-owned China Energy Company Limited (CEFC), establishing its European base in Prague in 2015. The conglomerate got strong political support, also from President Zeman. The CEFC made several significant acquisitions, including the Czech biggest private airline Travel Service, Czech largest online travel agency Invia.cz, Florentinum office buildings, Lobkowicz Group brewery, five-star hotels in Prague, a television channel Barrandov, the newspapers Týden, and Slavia Praha football club. These acquisitions had a strategic dimension and further implications for Czech-Chinese relations, as it allowed Chinese investors access to Czech media (McCaleb - Szunomár, 2017). Moreover, the company chairman Ye Jianming was even named an advisor to Czech President Zeman. Since 2018, the Chinese national conglomerate CITIC Group has been, however, gradually taking over CEFC's assets that had large debts for almost a billion USD (Debiec - Jakóbowski 2018; Idnes 2019). According to data from the state agency CzechInvest, Chinese investors promised two projects in the Czech Republic for 881 million CZK in 2020.

We can say that the flow of Chinese investments to the Czech Republic generally increased after the EU accession. Similarly to other CEE countries, Chinese companies are attracted to invest by institutional factors, investment incentives, and visa policies but also by the nature of political relations as well as the government's willingness for cooperation (McCaleb and Szunomár 2017).

Trade Exchange

The Czech trade deficit with China has been growing since 1993. According to Fürst and Pleschová (2010), the unsuccessful Czech economic diplomacy to boost exports to China also had a damaging effect on traditionally leading Czechoslovak industries, such as textile, shoe, and leatherwear production.

During the period 2005-2012, foreign trade turnover with China increased over three times, reaching the second-highest value (higher only in 2011) since the establishment of the independent country of the Czech Republic. The above average relative increase in Czech imports from China was recorded only by machinery and transport equipment, which has been determining the dynamics of total imports from China. In the same period, imports of machinery and transport equipment grew almost four times, and more than 80% of machinery and transport products accounted for an increase in total Czech imports from China (Czech Statistical Office 2013).

Since 2012, we can observe a new period of Chinese expansion into Europe. The so-called "Warsaw initiative" in 2012 was the first meeting of the 17+1 platform (originally 16+1) that represents a very diverse group of both EU and non-EU members from CEE plus China (Čuhlová 2019). Across this region, China is gaining more influence, which represents an essential achievement of Chinese diplomacy. Another, even more critical initiative of a bigger scale was introduced in 2013 as the Belt and Road Initiative, also known as the New Silk Road project (initially known as One Belt One Road). These mentioned frameworks have been significant components of a new period of China-Czech bilateral trade and investment partnership. Simultaneously, China was listed by the Czech government as a critical market for the export strategy for the period 2012-2020.

During the period 2012-2018, the Czech-China trade turnover increased from 13 billion to 25 billion EUR. Although the amount of Czech exports to China is still relatively low, in the same considered period, it experienced 71% growth. Again, machinery and transport equipment made up for more than half of direct exports. The trade analysis reveals that the fragmentation of world production has enabled more Chinese value-added exports to reach the EU western markets through processing in the Czech Republic (De Castro et al. 2017).

China has become the third-largest trading partner of the Czech Republic, as of 2018, imports from China accounted for 14,2% of total imports. The Czech Republic has become the second-largest trading partner of China in CEE (Czech Statistical Office 2019). Despite the rapid growth of Czech-Chinese bilateral trade volume illustrated by especially significant import values displayed in Figure 1, the trade deficit remains one of the highest and is still rising.

The Czech trade deficit with China originated in 1978, reappeared in 1994, and remained until now. The Czech trade deficit with China reached 22.74 billion USD in 2018. Although we welcome the moderation of trade deficit, it is essential to realize that the overall international Czech trade balance is in surplus. In this regard should be noted that exports to China represent just over one percent of the Czech Republic's total exports, and this share has remained virtually unchanged since 2011 (Czech Statistical Office 2019). Moreover, we should consider the issue of re-export. However, the calculation of the re-export value remains challenging.

Figure 1: Trade balance between the Czech Republic and China 1993-2018 (in mil. CZK)

Source: own processing based on Czech Statistical Office (2019)

Due to its advantageous geographical location in Central Europe and relatively cheap and educated labor force as well as industrial tradition and export-oriented economy, the Czech Republic's involvement in the mostly neighboring German-led international supply chain provides trade opportunities for China (Zhou et al 2019).

VÁCLAV HAVEL 1989-2003

Václav Havel (1936-2011) was elected as the first democratic President of Czechoslovakia after the "Velvet Revolution" in December 1989. Then, he was re-elected twice by the Czech Parliament deputies in 1993 and 1998, and the period of Havel's presidential office took from 1989 till 2003. Havel's concept of diplomacy originates in his political attitudes in the time of dissidence and underground culture in 70's and 80's when he became a Czechoslovak leader of anti-communist resistance before 1989 (Kaiser 2009). In general, Havel's presidential influence is characterized as a political break in Czech-Chinese relations, when, due to his human rights policy, he interrupted the incoming development of Czech-Chinese trade. However, given the international political situation at the time, Havel's work in the 90's can be seen more as a political gesture than real policy. Moreover, the relative growth of the mutual Czech-Chinese trade was the most significant under Havel's presidency. His policy followed the policies of other post-communist countries of Central Europe of that time (i.e., Poland and Hungary) and so analogously the situation in China's bilateral contacts with other CEE countries (Tubilewicz 1998).

Havel co-authored the Petition entitled "Charter 77" from 1977, which criticized the government for human rights violations (Blažek - Schovánek 2018) and he also was a leader of the initiative aiming at monitoring unjustly politically prosecuted citizens in Czechoslovakia "The Committee for the Defense of the Unjustly Prosecuted" (Suk 2013). Havel co-founded the "Movement for Civic Freedom" in 1988, which called for the abolition of Article 4 of the Czechoslovak Constitution, guaranteeing the leading role of the

Communist Party (Glenn 2001, p. 65). In the same period, in 1989, he was the author of the petition "Several sentences," which pointed out the non-compliance with Czechoslovakia laws and was a reaction to Havel's imprisonment by the socialist regime.

Havel was a journalist, playwright, and novel-writer. He therefore performed foreign policy in an "impartial, independent way." During the post-revolutionary period and his presidency, he had great support in the citizens, and there remains strong sentiment for his personality in the Czech Republic (even after he died in 2011). He did not form his belief upon political ideology, and his attitude can be understood from his conviction of a suprapartial (impartial) president (Kosatík 2019).

"Truth and love must prevail over lies and hatred" was Havel's election slogan. He was associating "lie and hatred" with the authoritarian regimes limiting individual human rights. Terms such as "democratic" and "freedom" were the cornerstones of his politics and diplomacy. Therefore, the first president's foreign visit (except neighbors) led to the Western countries (as Germany, Austria, UK, France, USA), while representatives of the former Eastern Communist bloc countries that did not undergo political changes were outside Havel's interest (Cuba, China, the former Soviet Union). Havel even supported these regime's political opposition; no other European country experienced such enthusiastic and tireless efforts to criticize China due to Tibet and human rights issues. It involved inviting mainland Chinese dissidents and promoting non-official but very cordial relations with Taiwan (Fürst - Tesař 2013).

Havel, in his first New Year's presidential speech in 1990 on Czechoslovak television, concluded his wish to strengthen the authority of the state abroad and to Pope John Paul II or Tibetan Dalai Lama to visit Czech country (Havel 1990). Tibetan Dalai Lama came to Prague in February 1990. However, the Czech President re-evaluated his attitude under diplomatic pressure and, unlike the Pope (who arrived at an official state visit in April 1990), Dalai Lama came only for a private visit, when he met President Havel and issued a "Common Declaration" that included the desire to achieve liberation from oppression, spiritual and material poverty (Havel - Dalai Lama, 1990). In the context of Dalai Lama's honor of receiving the Nobel Peace Prize in 1989 and China's deep political crisis after the events in Tiananmen Square, this "private" visit caused loud protests from the Chinese circles and formed China's deep caution towards Czechoslovak foreign policy. In the same year, President Havel also supported the commemoration of the events at Tiananmen Square and expressed his wish to overcome the "bamboo curtain" (Fürst 2010, p. 42). Mutual official relations were therefore held at a lower level for further four years. In particular, the Deputy Czech Minister of Foreign Affairs Martin Palouš was formally consolidated and proposed opening another Czechoslovak consulate in Hong Kong. President Havel received a visit by the Chinese Foreign Minister Qian Qichen in September 1991 (Fürst 2010). The Chinese side was motivated by an effort to break international political isolation and even offered the Czech Ambassador to China personally visit Tibet (Československá zahraniční politika 1991).

As presidential powers were to some extent titular and limited by the Czechoslovak Constitution, Havel tried to promote his "idealistic" political philosophy based on his international reputation mainly through public speeches, statements, and lectures. In this context, it is also worth mentioning the activities of his first wife Olga Havlová as President Havel, for example, unofficially visited Taiwan on behalf of her foundation "Committee of Goodwill."

In political reality, Havel was pushed from idealistic foreign policy to so-called "realpolitik." The tension between government policy and "castle" (presidential) policy was the most significant issue of the Czech Republic's diplomatic relations with China. The lack of unified Czech policy towards China was a significant obstacle to the development of further economic relations. Both countries maintained a formal relationship without further development. Nevertheless, political stagnation and cooling did not have such a significant

impact on the development of cultural relations between the two countries at a very high level. President Havel, as a playwright and artist, contributed in his name to their development.

Double-track relations to China began to be significant in Czechoslovak foreign policy and diplomacy. Czechoslovak Prime Minister Marian Čalfa had a pragmatic policy towards China (he was a member of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia before the Velvet Revolution). On the other hand, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of the Foreign Affairs Jiří Dientsbier senior (a dissident before the Velvet Revolution, a signatory of Charter 77, and a close friend of President Havel) held a more critical attitude.

Dientsbier senior had a marginal political influence on the first official government visit of the Czechoslovak delegation to China under Prime Minister Marian Čalfa in 1991. The delegation signed general memoranda on "Agreement on Promotion and Mutual Protection of Investments" (Agreement on Promotion and Mutual Protection of Investments 1991).

With the establishment of the independent Czech Republic state and the re-election of Havel to the post of Czech President (1993), his critical diplomacy towards China continued. The embassies in both countries were maintained, but the bilateral exchange continued "only" at the ministerial level. Klaus made the first official visit of the Czech Prime Minister in 1994 (in office 1993-1997). Klaus followed a pragmatic economic attitude and stood in opposition to Havel that continued mentioning the possibility of independent Taiwan several times, most notably at the press conference in New York in 1995 (Havel, 1999).

Most Czech governments were led by Prime Minister Klaus (1993-1997) or Zeman (1998-2002) with higher power established by the Czech constitution who pushed for "realpolitik" against President Havel's "idealistic" policy. Klaus and Zeman even made a special political deal for mutual support. The "Treaty on creating a stable political environment in the Czech Republic" (known better as "Opposition Agreement") was made between Czech Social Democratic Party and Civic Democratic Party, signed by two Chairmen - Zeman (Prime Minister, 1998-2002) and Klaus (Chairman of Chamber of Deputies of the Czech Parliament, 1998-2002). Paradoxically against this type of strategic policy, Havel gained support in the newly established Senate of the Czech Republic, which adopted an official resolution in 1998 criticizing human rights violations in China (Senat ČR 1998). In that time, the majority of the directly elected senators was promoting Havel's foreign policy. Thanks to Havel's presidential activity, diplomatic relations were "conserved" in the formal frame.

Among the most significant progress in Czech-China relations was the visit of Prime Minister of the Czech Republic Zeman in December 1999 to China, where a formal "Joint Communiqué of the Government of the People's Republic of China and the Government of the Czech Republic" was signed (Foreign Policy of the Czech Republic, 1999). However, developing diplomatic relations stagnated again when President Havel invited Tibetan spiritual leader Dalai Lama and Taiwanese President Lee Teng-Hui to attend the "Forum 2000", which is the conference in Prague, entitled "Education, Culture and Spiritual Values." Dalai Lama participated eight times in the conference despite the Chinese official protests (Forum 2000, 2019).

The end of President Havel's mandate at the beginning of 2003 coincides with the Czech foreign policy's results on accession to the EU and the change in Czech foreign policy in line with international interests and commitments of the EU. The idealistic policy of presidential diplomacy ends with the arrival of the new president, former prime minister of Czechoslovakia and the Czech Republic, Václav Klaus, who held the presidency in 2003-2013.

When evaluating the presidency of Havel, it is necessary to count also unrealized activities. Despite his critical attitude towards Chinese politics, there is information that Havel's visit to China has been intended and slowly prepared; even the Chinese government reportedly

expressed interest (Fürst 2010). When judged from the perspective of Czech economic interests, Havel's presidency term remains the most favorable for the ratio between Czech import and export. For the last time in 1993, Czech exports exceeded imports from China. Table 2 below shows how the negative economic trade balance between the Czech Republic and China has gradually increased in time.

Table 2: Trade balance of the Czech Republic with China 1993-2017 (in mil. CZK)

	The arithmetic mean of the Trade Balance (year-on-year)	Trade Balance (absolute value)	Czech export to China (absolute value)	Chinese Investment to Czech Republic (absolute value)
Václav Havel (1993-2003)	-16 546	-165 463	29 829	1 540 814
Václav Klaus (2003-2013)	-176 512	-1 765 129	158 414	4 577 809
Miloš Zeman, act. (2013-2017)	-387 482	-2 324 896	284 928	22 607 872

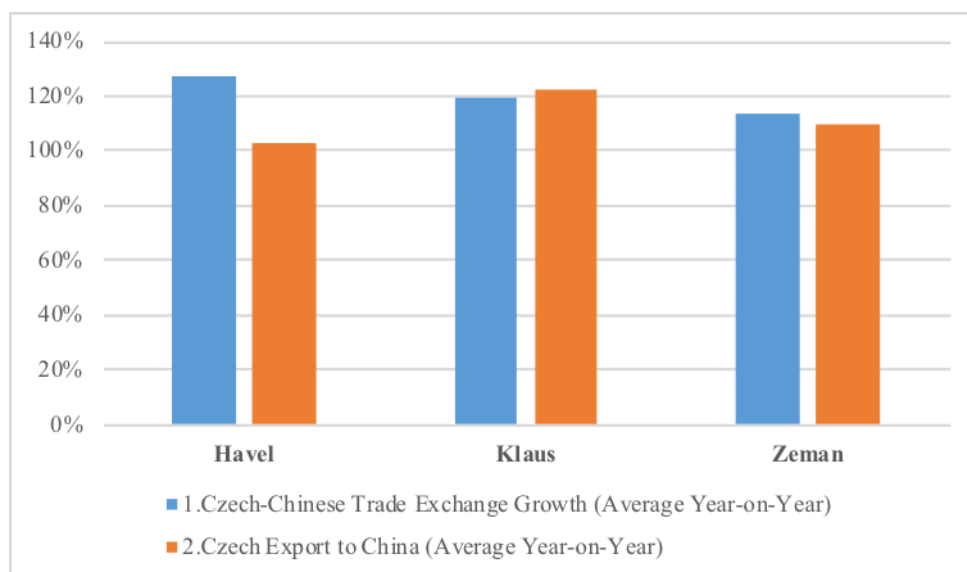
Source: Own processing based on the Czech Statistical Office (2019), Czech National Bank (2019)

As illustrated by figures, the balance of the economic exchange between the Czech Republic and China has been the most advantageous for the Czech side so far during the Havel's Presidency (Fürst and Tesař 2013). During the period of Havel's presidency, the yearly arithmetic average of growth of the total trade balance between the Czech Republic and China was the highest 127.7 % so far; for comparison with President Klaus (119.2 %) and Zeman (111.3 %) the yearly average. At the same time, the export of Czech goods to China recorded comparable values to two other presidents Klaus and Zeman (in %). On average, exports of Czech goods to China amounted to 103 % per year during President Havel (compare to 122.6 % during President Klaus, and 109.7 % during President Zeman). The average increases per year of Czech exports to China are shown in the following figure 2.

In terms of economic indicators, it can be confirmed that despite Havel's critical policy towards China, mutual trade in relative numbers for the Czech side was more effective and valuable in some indicators compared to Klaus's and Zeman's presidential diplomacy performed afterward. It mainly concerns two monitored criteria: lower negative trade Czech balance and the most significant relative average trade exchange growth in year-on-year (in percentage).

It was declared that Chinese investment in the Czech Republic was the lowest in absolute values during Havel's period. This situation related to the late 1990s and the beginning of the 21st century when China and the EU set the background for the future rapid growth of economic relations. Chinese investment was higher for presidents Klaus and Zeman, especially. In the following chapters, the extent of Chinese reinvestment in the Czech Republic is analyzed in more detail.

Figure 2: Year-on-year index (in %) of mutual trade exchange growth (1) and exports from the Czech Republic to China (2)



Source: Own processing based on the Czech Statistical Office (2019) and Czech Trade (2004)

VÁCLAV KLAUS 2003-2013

Václav Klaus (*1941) was elected the Czech Republic President in 2003, re-elected in 2008 (in the second round of the election). He was an economist by education (as next President Zeman) and worked at the Prognostic Institute of the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences in the '80s. Klaus was neither a dissident (not signing the informal civic initiative "Charter 77"), nor a member of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia. During the communist era, he had menial jobs due to his activities. He was one of the prominent figures of the Velvet Revolution, where he held the post of Minister of Finance in Czechoslovakia. In 1993-1997, Klaus was the Prime Minister of the Czech Republic and Chairman of the most influential right-wing liberal party Civic Democratic Party (1991-2002). As a co-creator of the Czech Republic's free-market economic system, he was considered a pragmatist and a politician focusing on economic-political relations (Pehe 2010).

At the time of the first Havel's mandate, he was considered as Havel's political opponent from his Prime Minister position (Kopeček 2012), demonstrated by Klaus's different approach towards China. He no longer emphasized the issue of human rights and minorities in China. Given the rapid development of the global world, he understood China as an economic opportunity and economic partner for the Czech Republic. Although Klaus took office in 2003 to understand his political philosophy, we must return to his relationship with China in the '90s. As already mentioned, he was the first Prime Minister of the independent Czech Republic who visited China with the government delegation in October 1994. The monitoring report of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs clearly shows that he primarily focused on Czech businesses in the Chinese market (Fürost 2010). Shortly after he was elected the President, Klaus met briefly with the Chinese President in 2003 during the EU and Russia summit in St. Petersburg (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic 2004).

The Czech Republic's accession to the EU opened up opportunities for Czech economic cooperation with China, supported by a particular treaty "EU-China comprehensive strategic partnership in 2003", and Klaus could afford to base the economic policy on the strength of the EU (Maher 2016).

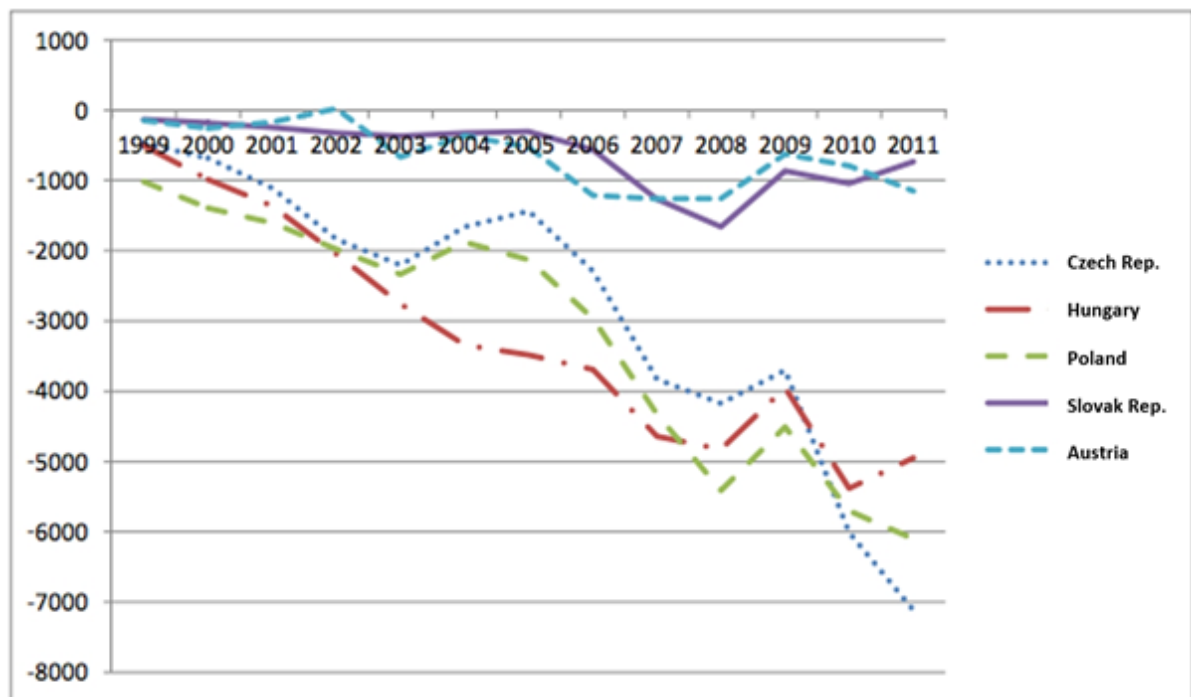
In 2004, President Klaus, accompanied by Czech business representatives (PPF, Skoda Auto, Chemoprojekt, Czech Export Bank, and others), visited China and stated in the Czech press that it was necessary to distance himself from the policy of "exalted mentoring and political provocations" because "let us not forget the economic side of things. Whether we like it or not, we live surrounded by Made in China products" (Klaus, 2004). The EU membership has strengthened the status of the Czech Republic in the eyes of a large international environment and the Chinese perception. It was even demonstrated by the visit of Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao in Prague that happened after the long-lasting lack of interest of Beijing in Prague's affairs only a year after the country joined the EU. The development in absolute economic figures between the Czech Republic and China changed significantly as well, and the bilateral trade increased several times. Therefore generally accepted interpretation says the growth in trade correlates with Klaus's presidency (Fürst 2010).

The role of pragmatic presidential diplomacy in China has manifested from 2006. At that time, the Czech general public was strongly anti-Chinese (Fürst 2010), and most media portrayed Chinese politics as authoritarian and anti-Tibetan, which was also reflected in Czech domestic policy. A group of "Friends of Tibet" was set up in Czech Parliament as a response to the increasingly popular "Tibet Days." Moreover, the display of the Tibetan flag in public offices was generally accepted, and local politicians demonstrated their political philosophy. There was a slight provocation from the parliament deputies who had taken pictures with the Tibetan and Taiwanese flags on an official visit to the Chinese Chamber of Deputies in 2008. The apparent result was that Czech diplomacy had the opportunity to get a non-permanent member of the UN Council in 2008, but this diplomacy was awarded to Croatia due to Chinese anti-Czech reactions. Before the Beijing Olympics in 2008, some Czech legislators protested against the games as, in their opinion, China used the games to market the communist regime.

Klaus did not involve the topics of Tibet and Taiwan to the official matters. However, during Klaus's Presidency, Dalai Lama came to the Czech Republic five times. None of these meetings happened with Klaus. Each time Dalai Lama visited former President Havel and privately also other executives, such as then Prime Ministers Miroslav Topolánek and Jiří Fisher. He did not criticize the Chinese regime, nor did he openly support it, balancing between the domestic political situation and foreign economic interests. He did not take any particular policy towards China, and, to a certain extent; he followed and copied the EU policy (as mainly Poland or Hungary). Klaus opened the 11th China-EU Summit held in Prague because of the Czech EU presidency, but the role of Czech organizers and president was rather formal (Vogt 2012).

In general, Klaus's approach towards China can be summed up as a non-conflicting pragmatic attitude, but it also emphasizes Czech independence from foreign policy. Figure 3 demonstrates the continuity of Klaus' economic policy compared with other Central European states (Austria, Hungary, Slovakia, Poland).

Pragmatic but neutral attitude can be observed in Klaus's appointment of a new Czech ambassador to China Libor Sečka (in office 2009-2015), who contributed by his management to a direct air connection between Prague and Beijing from 2015. Klaus's approach to China in presidential diplomacy meant consolidating relations and coordinating Czech diplomacy with the interests of the Czech economy and with the European economic interests in China. Although the bilateral trade developed, so did a negative trade balance to the disadvantage of Czech exports.

Figure 3: Trade balance development between Central European countries and China (in mil. EUR)

Source: Semerák (2012)

MILOŠ ZEMAN (2013-PRESENT)

Miloš Zeman (*1944) was elected as the third President of the Czech Republic in 2013, with 54.8 % votes when the historically first direct presidential election in the Czech Republic took place. He was re-elected in 2018 in the second round and holds the post until now (footnote 2).

Zeman graduated from the University of Economics and joined the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia in 1968. His membership was revoked after he disapproved of the arrival of the Warsaw Pact troops of Czechoslovakia. He entered the political scene in 1992 when he joined the Czech Social Democrat Party as a member of the Federal Assembly. After the establishment of the independent Czech Republic, Zeman became a Chairman of the Czech Social Democratic Party that developed into a major political party. From 1996 to 1998, Zeman held the position of the Chairman of the Chamber of Deputies of the Czech Parliament. In 1998, he was elected to Prime Minister of the Czech Republic and served one term.

Zeman ran for the presidency in 2003 presidential elections when Klaus won the majority votes. Although Zeman was asked to run for the presidency again in the next elections, he decided not to and left the Czech Social Democratic Party in 2007.

When Zeman became President in 2013, he has abandoned the previous Czech Republic's critical approach of a "Defender of Values" and positively encouraged Czech-Chinese relations as one of a "Faithful Ally of China" (footnote 3) (Bajerová and Turcsányi 2019). He visited China as the first Czech President in the past ten years in 2014. This step made a significant change in the Czech-Chinese relations and unofficially "reset" mutual relations. Moreover, Zeman explicitly stated that Tibet and Taiwan are integral parts of China. About that time, China began to be proactive in foreign policy, re-establishing itself as a pro-reform and open country.

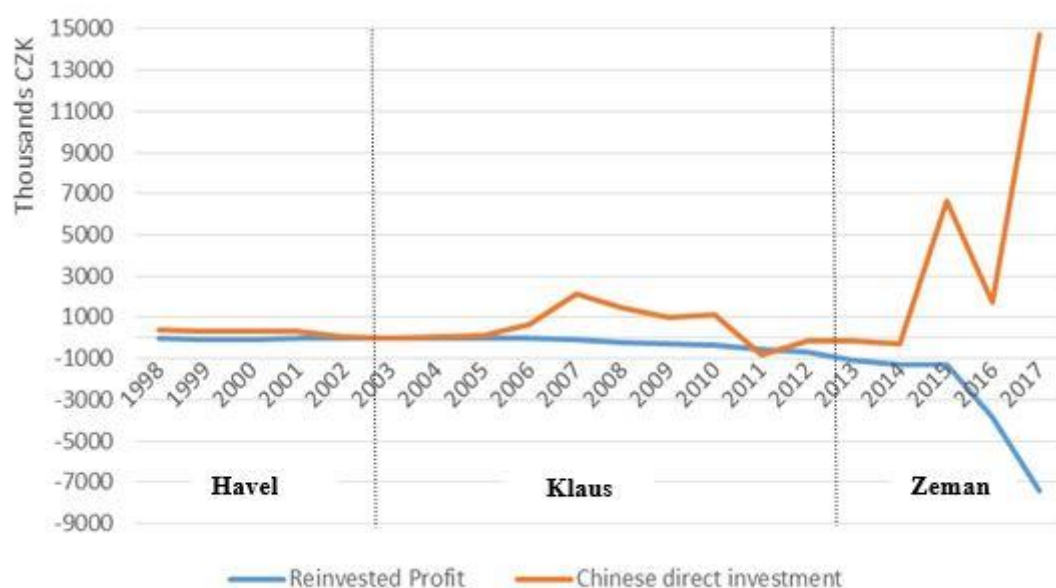
President Zeman was the only EU president to participate in the celebration of the 70th anniversary of the victory in the Chinese-Japanese War in 2015, and this diplomatic act officially established the Czech Republic as a Chinese ally. Chinese President Xi Jinping visited Prague in 2016, and it was the first time of Chinese President in the Czech country ever and thus undoubtedly the most important event in the history of the Czech-China relations. It was also the first visit of President Xi in a country of CEE region since his inauguration. Together with President Zeman, they attended the China Investment Forum in Prague, where a series of critical economic agreements and memoranda of understanding between Czech and Chinese partners were signed.

Since Zeman's presidency, several essential developments in the strategic partnership with China have happened at both the political and economic levels. Simultaneously, President Zeman has raised doubts about the value orientation of the Czech Republic. In the beginning, he loudly subscribed to the EU but questioned it for the rest of the mandate. He tried to make foreign policy a pragmatic instrument of economic policy. As pointed out (Turcsányi - Qiaoan 2019), Zeman bases his friendship with China on effective Chinese state performance, investment opportunities for the Czech Republic, and diversification of Czech foreign policy.

President Zeman claims the highest share in opening up a relationship with China, which is perceived quite critically by part of the Czech society (Hospodarske noviny 2018), and it is a frequent medial topic. For instance, the case when the Czech Information Security System, in its annual report, pointed out the existence of Chinese spies operating under diplomatic cover. According to this report, China has been trying to disrupt the EU policy through "Czech entities" via targeting energy, telecommunications, finance, logistics and healthcare sectors (BIS 2018). However, President Zeman has considered these findings without evidence (iRozhlas 2018).

Figure 4 illustrates the reinvested profit in relation to Chinese direct investment during the period 1998-2017. Despite the growing amount of Chinese direct investment, the statistics show that Chinese outflow investment in recent years is outnumbering the inflow investment (Czech National Bank 2019). Moreover, Chinese investors do not often create new greenfield investments but acquire strategic areas such as energy, transport infrastructure, or hi-tech businesses.

Figure 4: Reinvested Profit and Chinese Direct Investment 1998-2017 (in thousands CZK)



Source: Own processing based on the Czech National Bank (2019)

Following the findings of the previous research (Fürst - Pleschová 2010; Bajerová - Turcsányi 2019), China-oriented change of Czech Republic's positioning did not bring significant economic results as expected.

Simultaneously with Zeman's presidency, China put forward 16+1 Cooperation and Belt and Road Initiative. These frameworks launched by China have been actively used by both sides as a platform to promote mutual cooperation. According to Kowalski (2017), the Czech Republic is one of the Central and Eastern European countries that is receiving economic returns thanks to its political compliance with China. It supports the argument of indirect relation between the Czech-Chinese economic development and presidency diplomacy that is for its diplomatic role one of the factors. As Kowalski (2021) continues, Czech diplomatic ties with China encouraged by Zeman's presidency were strongly considered by China's "mask diplomacy" while transferring strategic medical supplies to Europe in spring 2020. The physical presence of Czech representatives, Prime Minister and Interior Minister, together with Chinese Ambassador welcoming the medical transport of equipment purchased from China was one of very few cases of this approach among European countries.

Of course, developing bilateral relations also happen on subnational level. The success of the foreign activity of the regions is to some extent determined by the overall Czech foreign policy towards China. In 2005 the Central Bohemian Region concluded the first Czech regional partnership with the Chinese province shortly after the conclusion of the Agreement on economic cooperation between China and the Czech Republic. Furthermore, after 2013 when Zeman's presidency has started, several partnerships were concluded at the regional level. The contrary cases can also be found. In 2010 and 2012, the period of colder relations between the countries, two regional partnerships were also concluded, and the regions were basically one of the few intermediaries in the implementation of Czech-Chinese relations that time. The intensity of Czech-Chinese paradiplomatic relations is given by the extend of the same politic orientation of regional leaders and government (Böhm, 2018).

CONCLUSION

The paper investigates different types of presidential diplomacy in the broader context of contemporary political and economic changes during the presidency of Václav Havel (in office 1989-2003), Václav Klaus (in office 2003-2013), and Miloš Zeman (in office 2013 - nowadays). The analysis observes the relationship between a level of diplomatic activity of the three presidents of the Czech Republic (i.e., presidential diplomacy) and the Czech-Chinese economic development during the examined period of 1993-2019.

The findings are based on research questions stated in the first part of the paper investigating the positive direct effects of the independent activities of Czech presidential diplomacy and: (i.) the continual growth of mutual Czech-Chinese trade; (ii.) the Czech-Chinese trade balance in favor of Czech exporters; and (iii.) the growth of reinvested Chinese profit in the Czech Republic.

Findings show that (i.) presidential diplomacy has a positive effect on mutual trade in absolute numbers, but the growth of economic development is higher by lesser presidential activity (Havel) in relative percentage. The time of Havel presidency meant sharp and critical policy to the Chinese regime in the name of human rights, but although Havel never met with a Chinese president, he fulfilled his diplomatic duty to China accordingly, and created standard international relations. In terms of economic diplomacy, Havel's period contributed to minimal negative aspects of mutual trade (i.e., lowest trade deficit), and even to the highest growth of trade exchange by statistical year-on-year average. Relative percentage (year-on-year) growth of trade exchange was highest in the period of presidential activity following the interests of other CEE countries and EU membership

(Klaus). We can state that the role of presidential diplomacy has increased due to the Czech Republic's accession to the EU in 2004 since the Czech-Chinese trade has started to develop in absolute figures steeply. The Presidency of Klaus (2003-2013), led by economic pragmatism, coincides with that period. The lowest growth of mutual trade occurred during very active presidential diplomacy (Zeman). We can summarise that there was no direct positive influence between Czech presidential diplomacy and the Czech-Chinese economic growth of mutual trade (in percentage year-on-year).

In terms of the relationship between presidential diplomacy and support for Czech exports (ii.), there is an indirect relationship in relative as well as absolute economic data. The Czech trade deficit with China decreases most sharply (Tab. 1, Fig 1) in the period of the most significant presidential diplomacy concerning China (Zeman's period). This trend is caused by significantly increasing imports from China, incomparable with the growth of Czech exports to China.

The rate of reinvested profit of Chinese investment in the Czech Republic (iii.) is also inversely proportional to the activity of presidential diplomacy, and thus no positive direct effect was found. Despite the frequency of meetings between President Zeman and representatives of the Chinese government, during his presidency, there is the lowest rate of numerical reinvested investment in the Czech Republic in comparison with other presidents (Fig. 4).

Based on the comparison of economic statistics and history of diplomatic activity, authors argue that there is an indirect link of inconsistency between the Czech presidential diplomacy and the mutual Czech-Chinese economic development. In all three declared areas, the relation between the activity of presidential diplomacy and economic results cannot be documented. This inconsistency is evidenced by a numerical representation in the text (Tab. 2, Fig. 1, 2, 3, 4), which does not correspond to political activity (Tab. 1).

Despite the argument that Zeman's Presidency has evolved China-Czech relations into the strategic partnership, it is presumable that without EU membership, China would not pursue such intense relations with such a small economy and a small player in the global political context as the Czech Republic is. Czech partnership in other initiatives, such as the 17+1 platform and the Belt and Road Initiative, also increased the interest in cooperation from the Chinese side. The President Zeman has a reputation for being one of the most China-friendly politicians in Europe however other Czech political personas such as Senate Speaker Vyskočil demonstrate their friendship towards Taiwan. Through the history, this is quite typical case of division of attitude regarding to the relation. Although the presented analysis did not confirm any direct positive links between Czech presidency diplomacy and Czech-Chinese economic exchange in Czech favor, it is evident that changes in domestic political representation affects the Czech foreign policy approach towards China.

When looking into future, the Czech parliamentary elections may shape the Czech stance again. Since President Zeman is not eligible to run for another term, the next presidential elections will have an even more significant impact.

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ENDNOTES

1. For example, Havel's meetings with Ambassador of the P.R.C. in 1993 and 1995; reception of the Chinese Foreign Minister in 1996; farewell to Chinese Ambassador in 1999; reception of Ambassador of the P.R.C. in 1999; farewell to Chinese Ambassador in 2002; Reception of Ambassador of the P.R.C. in 2002 (The President's Office Archives, 2019).
2. The next presidential election will be held in 2023. According to the Constitution of the Czech Republic, Zeman can no longer stand for president as the election is impossible for three consecutive elections.
3. The term "Defender of Values" expresses the human rights-related discourse in comparison with later "Faithful Ally of China" standing for China-friendly and non-critical approach (Bajerová – Turcsányi, 2019)

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Research Article

On framing the EU: A plea for the relaunch of frame analysis in the study of elite and mass attitudes on European integration

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Abstract

This article makes the case that attitudes towards the EU should be conceptualised as interpretative 'frames', to then be employed as analytical tools for comparison within and between European countries. As is argued, at present this move is all the more necessary, since multiple asymmetrical crises and the entrenchment of 'differentiated integration' have compounded the contested, open-ended nature of European integration. In parallel, EU studies have already increasingly acknowledged the context dependence, heterogeneity and ambivalence of such attitudes, moving beyond the presumption of stable support or opposition. This article leverages a variety of extant works and the empirical outcomes of a deductive-cum-inductive research endeavour to craft a comprehensive inventory of 16 interpretative frames. Then, it highlights a fundamental prospective application, discussing practices devised to enable the construction of a frame-based approach to mass-elite congruence on European integration. Further avenues for future research, which could be pursued on the back of a relaunch of frame analysis in EU studies, entail the study of Euroscepticism, national 'issue cultures' and 'issue fields', and mass-level attitudes towards the EU.

Keywords

Frames; European Union; Attitudes; Euroscepticism; Congruence

Are the elites of Europe living in the same European worlds as their populations? Once defined as 'the most essential question since [...] Maastricht' (Thomassen and Schmitt 1999: 188), this problem entirely retains its centrality in the wake of the recent predicaments of political Europe. This article makes the case for conceptualisation of attitudes towards European integration in terms of 'frames of interpretation' of the EU, to be pinpointed and then employed as analytical tools for the comparison of views espoused by ordinary citizens and political actors throughout the continent.

Over the last decade, EU member states have been asymmetrically plagued by a sequence of crises, including the sovereign debt crisis, the migration crisis, geopolitical instability at the borders of Europe and in the international system, the erratic Brexit saga, the unending challenge of 'illiberal democracy', the Covid-19 pandemic and the ongoing energy crisis, not to mention war in Ukraine (Riddervold, Trondal and Newsome 2021). Hard rifts have separated emerging coalitions of countries, and the equilibria between supranationalism and intergovernmentalism have been unbalanced, with Germany's role as a 'reluctant hegemon' (Bulmer and Paterson 2018) proving problematic in many respects. The EU itself has undergone a crisis of governance and legitimacy calling into question its very *raison d'être*, as reflected by the contentious ordoliberal consolidation of the Eurozone as much as by the equally controversial stalemate over the handling of migrant inflows.

Seeking to explain the radical divergence between the outcomes of the Eurozone crisis and the Schengen crisis, Börzel and Risse (2018) underscored the way each crisis was framed by various countries and political forces. According to their reconstruction, the theoretical apparatus elaborated by postfunctionalism – beginning with the 'constraining dissensus' exerted by national publics – came closer than other grand theories to providing a full-fledged explanation. In any case, the two authors concluded 'that the more existing approaches take insights from social constructivism with regard to identity politics and the *framing* of issues in politicized public spheres into account, the better they can deal with the subsequent European predicaments' (Börzel and Risse 2018: 102, author's emphasis). In fact, the proponents of postfunctionalism themselves had maintained that 'neither identity nor economic interest speak for themselves, but are cued and framed by political actors', so that, '[t]o understand variation in opinions on Europe, one must endeavour to explain how Europe is *constructed* in political debate' (Hooghe and Marks 2007: 125, emphasis in original).

This work substantiates the claim that, although awareness of the importance of framing processes has featured in EU studies as a subtle undercurrent, frame analysis has only rarely been deployed within the field and its analytical potential remains largely untapped. I establish my main contribution by recalling the 'usefulness of framing as a bridging concept between two levels of analysis – between cognition and culture' (Gamson 1985: 615). In other words, interpretative frames – as compared to more frequently considered alternatives such as recurring items in opinion surveys – are closer to the ways in which political actors depict the European issue and ordinary citizens make sense of it. Hence, I build on conceptual and empirical insights to articulate an inventory of 16 ideal-typical frames, which correspond to distinct viewpoints on the essence of the EU and may undergird positive, negative, ambivalent, or neutral views. This approach, striking a balance between interpretation-inspired *Verstehen* and comparability-oriented classification, notably allows to bridge elite-based and mass-based accounts of support and opposition towards European integration.

The article comprises seven sections. First, I recapitulate the shifting, unsettled nature of the European project. Second, I examine how attitudes towards European integration display context dependence, heterogeneity, and ambivalence. The third section presents the concept of frame and its operationalisation. The fourth ponders on existing studies with a view to constructing a list of interpretative frames, which is illustrated in the fifth section. The sixth section discusses practices for a frame-based approach to mass-elite congruence on European integration. In the conclusions, I summarise the crux of my arguments and their relevance for future research.

THE CONTESTED NATURE OF THE EUROPEAN PROJECT

A necessary premise of this article is that the essence of European integration, as a project and a process, can hardly be taken for granted – now less than ever. In relation to different policy domains and to the main dimensions of political competition in EU member states, the European issue reveals an autonomous character, neither stable nor uniform across time and countries.

To begin with, insofar as external sovereignty is involved, European integration may be associated with foreign policy, as exemplified by Churchill's doctrine of the 'three circles' (see Gamble 2003). Yet, by virtue of the level and scope of its powers, the EU has outclassed any other international organisation. In historical perspective, European integration has been primarily connected with the economic sphere since the 'common market' embodied by the EEC, its revamping with the Single European Act, and the Treaty of Maastricht, which presided over completion of the EMU. Tellingly, writing in the mid-1990s, Hooghe and Marks (1997) had portrayed the EU polity as dominated by the struggle between two economic projects: the neoliberal project, supported by right-wing nationalists, and regulated capitalism, espoused by supranationalists mainly leaning to the left.

However, the same authors later developed their postfunctionalist theory (Hooghe and Marks 2009) by tying the increasing politicisation of the EU to a sociocultural antithesis – having emerged alongside the traditional socioeconomic dimension – between a green/alternative/libertarian (GAL) pole and a traditionalism/authority/nationalism (TAN) pole. Another specification identified the European issue as part of a cultural dimension heralding an overall shift towards a cleavage between 'integration' and 'demarcation', between the 'winners' and 'losers' of globalisation (Kriesi et al. 2006). On whether Europe embodies a distinct third axis, rather than having been absorbed by the sociocultural one, the jury is still out. An empirical analysis of the politicisation of both Europe and immigration in six Western European countries drew the two issues apart, in that:

European integration is a more complex, multi-faceted issue that is difficult to handle for most politicians as it is a moving target, attitudes to it are often ambivalent, and the framing of what European integration is actually about is highly contested. (Hoeglenger 2016: 49)

Certainly the Maastricht Treaty, beside coining the name 'European Union', 'marks the moment when divisions between European and domestic policy begin to become increasingly blurred in the areas of political, economic, social, legal, environmental and foreign affairs' (Usherwood and Startin 2013: 3). Broadly speaking, from the Common Fisheries Policy to the Working Time Directive, from the Prüm Decisions to Structural and Investment Funds, the European layer of governance is now involved – albeit with varying competences and pervasiveness – virtually in every policy area, which produces a multiplicity of possible vantage points. As perceptively argued by Flood, the 'hybrid, multi-level, unfinished' EU:

is open to widely differing interpretations within as well as between different ideological currents. To what extent is it (becoming) democratic? To what extent is it (becoming) a bastion of economic neoliberalism? Is it destroying the identities and autonomy of its constituent nations or is it protecting them insofar as necessary adaptation to modern global conditions makes it healthy to do so? Is it a grandiose folly, condemned to fail by the laws of history and human nature? Or does it represent the possibility of a truly rational, postmodern order? (Flood 2002: 7)

Currently, the European construction looks as 'hybrid' as ever, while the hardening and spreading of opposition has seemingly caused its 'unfinished' character to become structural. The very *telos* of an 'ever closer union' took a symbolic blow when British Prime Minister David Cameron, upon renegotiating the terms of UK membership prior to the 2016 referendum, secured a specific exemption from the aspiration formally referenced three times in the EU

Treaties. Prolonged democratic backsliding in EU member states such as Hungary and Poland, and the laborious search for viable countermeasures, have raised a further existential conundrum. The concept of 'multi-speed Europe' is now frequently invoked no longer as a partial brake, but rather as an inexorable necessity to salvage the kernel of the process. Accordingly, scholars have theorised 'differentiated integration' (Leruth and Lord 2015; Leuffen, Rittberger and Schimmelfennig 2013), but also 'disintegration' and 'differentiated disintegration' (Webber 2019; Schimmelfennig 2018).

The open-ended, contradictory nature of the European project, compounded by the current circumstances, inevitably affects the study of Euroscepticism, by highlighting unsteady assumptions made by the most renowned works in the field. The studies that kickstarted research on party-based Euroscepticism tied their categories to opposition to 'core' EU policies, as distinct from 'peripheral' ones (Taggart and Szczerbiak 2003), and to 'the current form of integration in the EU' (Taggart and Szczerbiak 2004: 3). Another well-known article equated diffuse support for European integration with approval for 'institutionalized cooperation on the basis of pooled sovereignty (the political element) and an integrated liberal market economy (the economic element)' (Kopecký and Mudde 2002: 301), although, as pointed out by Kný and Kratochvíl (2015), what Art. 3 TEU actually mentions is 'social market economy'.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, recent studies have worked around the categories of 'hard' and 'soft' Euroscepticism, devising labels such as 'equivocal Euroscepticism' in their analyses of empirical cases (Heinisch, McDonnell and Werner 2021). More generally, examples of the ambiguities of established categories of Euroscepticism have been raised by several scholars, according to whom previous contributions had anchored Euroscepticism in the essentialised, ahistorical vision of a mainstream practice of integration that never existed as such (Kný and Kratochvíl 2015; Crespy and Verschuieren 2009). Acting upon this concern, Crespy and Verschuieren (2009) advocated a study of resistances to European integration capable of taking into account the 'model' of the EU being opposed. Their own plea for frame analysis, and their identification of a number of frames of interpretation of the EU, serve as a precious mainstay of the endeavour I undertake in this article.

HETEROGENEITY AND AMBIVALENCE IN ATTITUDES TOWARDS THE EU

The argument that 'there is no possible univocal interpretation of the essence of the European project' (Crespy and Verschuieren 2009: 381) refers to political elites as well as national populations. For political parties, given its intricate governance and decision-making procedures, European integration amounts to a kaleidoscopic reality whose overall trajectory none of them can sway single-handedly. Different dynamics may separate 'mainstream' parties from 'challenger' ones, yet no party family displays a unitary approach to the EU, as extensively discussed in various chapters of the *Routledge Handbook of Euroscepticism* (Leruth, Startin and Usherwood 2018). Thus, politicians of different sides 'face a thorny and often unresolvable dilemma as some of their ideological core concerns speak in favour of certain aspects of European integration, while others lead them to adopt a sceptical stance' (Hoeglinger 2016: 58-59). In the perceptive words of two distinguished scholars, which delve deeper into this aspect:

the subjective lens through which they view the European project may well condition the positions that parties take on Europe. The European project as embodied in the EU can, in turn, be opposed (or, indeed, supported) on the grounds that it is [...] a Christian democratic, social democratic, liberal or regionalist project. Similarly, it may well be that some parties [...] view the European project as essentially a political project. In this case the EU is good in so far as it promotes internationalism, peace and security. Others may view the project as essentially economic. Seen through this lens, the EU is a way of either promoting prosperity, capitalism, socioeconomic cohesion or all of these things. (Taggart and Szczerbiak 2003: 14)

Citizens of EU member states, by contrast, do not always share the levels of cognitive sophistication characterising political elites, nor do they ordinarily get in contact with the political facets of European integration. Studies of public opinion towards the EU have long argued mass attitudes to have become 'structured' (Marks and Steenbergen 2004), despite the apathy and the indecisiveness observed among national populations (Van Ingelgom 2012). Yet, through in-depth interviews and focus groups, works pertaining to a 'qualitative turn' have cast doubt on whether European citizens have substantially incorporated the EU in their cognitive frameworks (see Duchesne 2012). In fact, a prominent review authored by two leading scholars recently acknowledged that '[a]t this point, we lack solid evidence as to whether citizens hold consistent and stable predispositions on European integration that shape political behavior in a predictable manner' (Hobolt and De Vries 2016: 426).

National contexts play a relevant part in organising attitudes towards European integration. 'Public responses to Europe are refracted through national institutions and patterns of discourse that reflect distinct historical trajectories' (Hooghe and Marks 2009: 14) of EU membership, encapsulated in debates sifted through national media. A compulsory reference is Diez Medrano's (2003) *Framing Europe*, which, joining analyses of the press with in-depth interviews, reconstructed the distinct conceptualisations of European integration having sedimented within the national communities of Germany, Spain, and the UK. More generally, references to nationally salient arguments on the essence of European integration naturally surface in accounts of the patterns of support and opposition towards the EU in any individual member state.

The same is true of analyses having sought to disentangle, on a case-by-case basis, the reasons behind the outcome of European referendums, such as the defeat of the Constitutional Treaty in France and the Netherlands in 2005 or the Brexit vote of 2016. Considering the French campaign, Taggart noted that 'the opponents of the Constitutional Treaty are defending a particular European vision, and it is hard not to see that particular construction of the European debate as a national one' (Taggart 2006: 17). Hobolt and Brouard, exploring the multidimensionality of EU-related attitudes among French and Dutch citizens, argued that 'European attitudes have [...] become intertwined with traditional domestic concerns' as drivers of the vote, concluding that 'the European issue is not firmly fixed within the existing policy space' (Hobolt and Brouard 2011: 319). Notably, the authors regarded their findings as 'challeng[ing] the conventional view of attitudes toward Europe as preferences that can be neatly ordered on a single scale from anti- to pro-European' (Hobolt and Brouard 2011: 319).

For its own part, the 'qualitative turn' has compellingly stressed – by analysing citizens' ways of discussing Europe in relation to concrete political problems (White 2010) or aspects of their lifestyles (Weber, Brand, Niemann and Koch 2020), or by asking for discursive answers to questions habitually included in the Eurobarometer surveys in closed-ended form – that ordinary people exhibit vastly different ways of talking about Europe, not all of which are properly 'political'. Through hundreds of semi-structured interviews in five European countries, the transnational project Concorde (2006-2009) drew remarkable conclusions:

Europe is not perceived by all citizens in the same way and the EU is not clearly identified in all segments of the public. Insofar as 'European' attitudes exist, they are not always clearly oriented. Not everyone is 'for' or 'against' Europe; some do not know whether they support or oppose it. Many reactions cannot be classified, or are contradictory or composite. On the other hand, some attitudes are stable, but despite what is frequently assumed, they are not all structured by preoccupations related to the political issues of European construction as they are framed and debated by politicians, journalists or commentators. (Gaxie 2011b: 239-240)

Concorde researchers identified 'a limited set of supporting practical elements which contribute to structuring attitudes, and on which almost everyone has something to say: the Euro, peace or free movement in Europe' (Dakowska and Hubé 2011: 90) as the baseline of people's thinking on European integration. They also contended that:

[t]here are very disparate visions of Europe: for politicised citizens, the representation of the EU is a political and institutional one. For others, Europe is above all about the Euro, opening the borders, and bringing people and cultures together. For those who are more distanced from European debates, things such as bird flu or the presence of two lines (for EU nationals and non-EU nationals) in airports for immigration checks are “evidence” of a European reality. (Dakowska and Hubé 2011: 91)

While the ‘qualitative turn’ represents a minority tradition, the mainstream of EU studies has autonomously moved to contemplate many of the above observations, considering multidimensionality, ambivalence, and context dependence. For instance, the cornerstone of the ‘benchmark theory’ proposed by De Vries is that *‘people’s evaluations of and experiences with the European project are fundamentally framed by the national circumstances in which they find themselves’* (De Vries 2018: ix, emphasis in original). Furthermore, moving beyond previous understandings of ‘public support as a single latent variable of fixed attitudes toward European integration’, recent works have suggested such opinions to be ‘inherently variable, reflecting differential degrees of certainty and ambivalence’ (Hobolt and De Vries 2016: 415). Attitudes have been reinterpreted as distributions of considerations, sometimes aligned and sometimes counterposed. Ambivalence may arise from contrasting evaluations of different aspects – the community, the political process, the various policies (De Vries 2018) – although inherent ambivalence towards the EU as a whole should also be envisaged. Stoeckel (2013), in particular, equated ‘ambivalence’ with the compresence of favourable and unfavourable thoughts about the EU in an individual’s mind, resolutely separating it from ‘indifference’.

In sum, the arguments hitherto mustered buttress the notion that European integration is a complex political object, amenable to contrasting interpretations to political elites and, a fortiori, to ordinary citizens, whose viewpoints are influenced by national cultures and characterised by varying levels of stability, consistency, depth, and connection with the objective operations of the EU.

THE CONCEPT OF ‘FRAME’ AS AN ANALYTICAL TOOL

Against this background, interpretative frames constitute a particularly promising instrument, insofar as the versatile concept of ‘frame’ adapts to all levels of generality. The act of framing may be described as ‘the process by which a source defines the essential problem underlying a particular social or political issue and outlines a set of considerations purportedly relevant to that issue’ (Nelson, Clawson and Oxley 1997: 222). According to a thicker operational definition, ‘[t]o frame is to *select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation*’ (Entman 1993: 52, emphasis in original).

As anticipated, Crespy and Verschueren (2009: 386) were pioneers in advocating frame analysis in relation to EU matters. And according to the rationale provided by a rare study of party frames, ‘[t]o understand Euroscepticism and Europeanism, we need to show not only what positions political actors take, but to understand how they present European integration to the populace, and which arguments they put forward to support or oppose it’ (Helbling, Hoeglenger and Wüest 2010: 516). I double down on such suggestions by underscoring that frames play a paramount role as the vehicle of communication between the strategic framing contests at the heart of politics and citizens’ inner processes of sense-making. Indeed, frames:

lead a double life: they are internal structures of the mind that help individuals to order and give meaning to the dizzying parade of events they witness as political history unfolds; they are also devices embedded in political discourse, invented and employed by political elites, often with an eye on advancing their own interests or ideologies. (Kinder and Sanders 1990: 74)

In this respect, the opinions gauged by the most common survey questions on European integration – for example, evaluations of EU membership as a good thing, a bad thing, or neither – should be more volatile than the underlying considerations that frame the EU as a common market, as the promise of ‘social Europe’, as a world power, or as something else entirely. Moreover, similar survey items are equipped neither to unveil ambivalence, nor to separate it from indifference. To comprehend whether different actors live in the same European worlds (Thomassen and Schmitt 1999), and to compare their attitudes between and within European countries, it is imperative to ascertain to what degree they view the EU through same lenses. This is predicated on the development of an array of frames, meaningfully representing the interpretations of European integration held by the elected legislator as well as the man in the street – or even an interest group’s spokesperson or a journalist.

To construct such an array of frames, given the cognitive differences that exist between elites and masses and amongst the latter, plus the differences between national discourses on Europe, a ‘thin’ operational definition must be preferred to a ‘thick’ one. Pronounced agreement arguably obtains between two sources who concur on the nature of the European ‘problem’ and related motives, and it would be unrealistic to expect any frame to convey agreement on more than the sheer substance of the European issue. Thus, a frame of interpretation of the EU is defined by *a viewpoint on what the EU is or does*, common to a fair number of voices and broadly recognisable in terms of internal consistency. By virtue of their nature as composite packages of facts, devices and arguments, interpretive frames – especially when they are endowed with high levels of generality – are composed of multiple building blocks, or ‘idea elements’ (Meyer and Höllerer 2010).

With respect to inspection of textual evidence, the elaboration of frames may proceed deductively, by delineating all of them in advance with precision and exhaustiveness, or conversely entail inductive examination of aptly selected textual corpora, possibly originated from multiple sources in different EU member states. Direct precedents do not abound. In fact, a few studies have dwelled on how the media frame European politics and the process of integration (Barth and Bijsmans 2018; Semetko and Valkenburg 2000). Yet, the endeavour to systematically reconceptualise views of the EU in terms of frames remains novel, as is the aim to consider ‘mass frames’ and ‘elite frames’ simultaneously. Accordingly, the exploratory findings presented here were gathered as part of a doctoral project (Pareschi 2019) that resorted to a deductive-cum-inductive approach, poring over extant literature to identify initial working categories, which were then refined in parallel with analysis of both elite-level and mass-level textual evidence drawn from France and the UK.

HOW TO FRAME THE EU? AN OVERVIEW

This section begins by discussing a handful of works that have explicitly referred to ‘frames’ about European integration (Taggart and Szczerbiak 2018; Barth and Bijsmans 2018; Wonka 2016; Helbling, Hoeglenger and Wüest 2010; Crespy and Verschuere 2009). Then, it seeks further footholds in extant typologies of motivations of Euroscepticism (Skinner 2013; Ruiz Jiménez and Egea de Haro 2011; Leconte 2010; Sørensen 2008; Lubbers and Scheepers 2005; Sørensen 2004; Taggart 1998). By taking stock of these analytical proposals in its final portion, it paves the way for the eventual reconstruction of a dedicated inventory of frames.

First among the former group is Crespy and Verschuere’s (non-exhaustive) list of ideal-typical models:

- i) a supranational “super-state” versus a “Europe of the nations”; ii) a Christian Europe [...] or even a “fortress Europe” versus a “cosmopolitan Europe”; iii) the model of a “social Europe” versus a “(neo)liberal Europe”; iv) a “military power Europe” versus a “pacifist Europe”. (Crespy and Verschuere 2009: 384-385).

Studying how the parties of six Western European countries framed European integration in 2004-2006, Helbling, Hoeglenger and Wüest (2010) developed a categorisation identifying: i)

under a 'cultural' heading, 'nationalistic' frames, focusing on threats to national independence and identity, but also 'multicultural-inclusive' frames, upholding cultural openness, and 'moral-universalistic' ones, revolving around rights; ii) under an 'economic' heading, 'labour and social security' frames, composed of arguments about the job market and the welfare state, and 'economic prosperity' frames, which embrace growth, competitiveness and economic policies; iii) 'other utilitarian frames', namely 'political efficiency and efficacy', referring to the workings and action capacity of the state or the EU, and 'security and ecology', grouping topics regarded as scarcely salient.

Wonka (2016) examined patterns of politicisation of the Eurozone crisis within the German Bundestag. His content analysis captured three 'generic frames': i) an 'economic' frame, centred on the 'issue sub-categories' of economic growth, employment, fiscal stability, and redistribution among member states; ii) a 'cultural' frame, revolving around German and European identity, migration and multiculturalism, sovereignty, and solidarity, too; iii) an 'institutional' frame, comprising functional aspects of (de)centralisation and effectiveness, but also democratic control and accountability. Each frame could be wielded with a positive, neutral, or negative orientation. Like Helbling and his colleagues, Wonka found the frames used by the various political forces not to be simply reducible to the respective party families.

Barth and Bijsmans (2018) pinpointed five frames employed by British and German quality newspapers in the 1990s, again in positive, neutral, or negative versions. The list included: i) national 'sovereignty', the European impact on it, and the role attributed to other member states; ii) 'economic consequences', entailing cost-benefit assessments, together with the structural traits ascribed to the European economic bloc; iii) 'security and peace', i.e. the successes and failures experienced by the European project in delivering such goals; iv) 'efficiency' upon tackling pressing issues; v) 'democratic quality', accountability, and legitimacy evaluated at the European level.

Taggart and Szczerbiak (2018) used expert surveys to explore the link between recent EU crises and the further entrenchment of party-based Euroscepticism. Notably, they also captured how Euroscepticism was articulated by 2015 in each member state. By and large, four frames were identified: i) economic factors, including criticism of austerity and bailouts, aversion to the euro, and wider opposition to a union alternatively dubbed as either too 'liberal' or too 'protectionist'; ii) immigration; iii) critiques based on the EU democratic deficit or the loss of national sovereignty, with the two arguments being often fused in practice; iv) *sui generis* national factors, such as concerns about Turkey. Alongside 'Economy', 'Immigration', 'Democracy' and 'Sovereignty', an extended country-by-country list featured entries like 'Values', 'Environmentalism', 'Militarism', 'Women's issues'.

The second group of studies mentioned above was inaugurated by Taggart (1998). His tripartition recognised, beside opposition to the very idea of European integration, two positions respectively opposing the EU because of its inclusiveness, squeezing together realities too diverse to be compatible, possibly in regard to sovereignty or immigration; and because of its exclusiveness, undermining social justice within the EU and vis-à-vis third countries. Instead, Lubbers and Scheepers (2005) separated a 'political' form of Euroscepticism, linked to the preferred decision-making level, from an 'instrumental', utilitarian form, in an article that mapped their diffusion and interrelation across Europe.

More sophisticated lines were drawn by Sørensen (2004), whose explorative comparison of British and Danish Euroscepticism distinguished six types of attitudes. Together with outright 'principled opposition', these types revolved around:

the integrity of the nation-state (*national sovereignty*); the values of the EU (*ideology*); the transfer of new competencies to the EU in order to enhance efficiency (*political performance*); the economic rationale of integration (*economic utility*); and the (lack of) emotional attachment to the European level (*affective pull*). (Sørensen 2004: 3, emphasis in original)

In a later contribution, Sørensen (2008) revised her inventory, streamlining the content of its categories so as to encompass: i) a 'utilitarian' type, informed by all considerations about costs and benefits; ii) a 'sovereignty-based' type, concerning national sovereignty, supranationalism or the preferred level of policy-making; iii) a 'democratic' type, questioning the institutional makeup and democratic credentials of the EU; iv) a 'social' type, rooted in left-wing wariness of its economically liberal character.

Leconte's (2010) fourfold classification of Euroscepticism comprised: i) a 'utilitarian' variety, either individual or sociotropic, built around concerns such as unequal treatment, fair returns, national interest, or the redistributive consequences of EU policies; ii) a 'political' variety, grouping anxieties about democratic deficit, pooling of sovereignty or a European identity; iii) a 'value-based' variety, hostile to EU interference in moral, religious or normative matters, possibly extending to immigration; iv) 'cultural anti-Europeanism', fearing a degeneration of identity, mistrusting other European countries, or espousing veritable ethnocentrism. Referring to Euroscepticism in Spain, Ruiz Jiménez and Egea de Haro (2011) covered a 'utility' heading, a 'principle' heading, comprising both democracy-based leanings and views rooted in traditional left and right, and a 'sovereignty' type, grouping power transfers but also national and cultural identity and centre-periphery dynamics.

Lastly, Skinner's (2013) account of Euroscepticism in Western European non-member states included: i) a 'utilitarian' (or 'economic') motivation; ii) a 'political' (or 'political culture') motivation, revolving around sovereignty, democracy and satisfaction with its functioning; iii) a somewhat narrow 'cultural' motivation, linked to national traditions such as international neutrality; iv) a 'post-materialist value-based' motivation, channelling social liberalism, international solidarity, pacifism or environmentalism in opposition to 'Fortress Europe' or market hegemony; v) a weakly specified 'right-wing value-based' motivation; vi) miscellaneous 'rural society' concerns, comprising fisheries, urbanisation, depopulation and the environment.

It is also worth noting that Stoeckel's (2013) cited analysis exploited an item that has been included in each Standard Eurobarometer since 2009: 'What does the European Union mean to you personally?' A variety of prisms underpin the available response categories, positively or negatively oriented: 'peace', 'cultural diversity', 'waste of money', 'economic prosperity', 'stronger say in the world', 'loss of cultural identity', 'democracy', 'Euro', 'more crime', 'social protection', 'unemployment', 'not enough control of external borders', 'freedom to travel, study and work anywhere in the EU', 'bureaucracy'.

Upon settling accounts, this overview reveals at once consistency and inconsistencies among the reviewed works. *Prima facie*, a 'family resemblance' characterises their classifications: the EU is amenable to being portrayed through prisms broadly linked to high politics, rights, society and culture, the economy, efficiency, and the international arena. Nevertheless, significant variation demarcates the content and boundaries of akin categories proposed by different scholars, as the precise connotation of certain 'idea elements' remains ambiguous. To give just one instance, does the embrace of European identity belong to a cultural sphere, in opposition to exclusive national identity, or to a political sphere, since it expresses support for a European polity, flag and anthem? Depending on how such a building block is articulated in context, it may as well evoke one or the other frame, or even multiple frames at once (in line with Huang 1995).

Before moving on, however, one cross-cutting consideration should be incorporated. Four ideal types of 'perceptions of Europe' were isolated by the Concorde project, corresponding to as many observation points: i) 'synoptic involvement', globally evaluating the EU through a register close to political debate; ii) 'restricted general involvement', conveying more ambiguous discourse through arguments often drawn from common sense; iii) 'limited involvement', reflecting intensive but bounded experience of European integration; iv) 'remote evaluation', entailing uncertain attribution of everyday problems to the European level (Gaxie

2011a). The general upshot, for the purposes of this article, is that viewpoints whose perspective is respectively *individual*, *situated* or *holistic* amount in effect to incommensurable frames. Any reconstruction of frames of interpretation of European integration should factor in this distinction where appropriate, e.g. by differentiating between the EU as an *economic benefit factor* and the EU as an *economic model*.

DISTILLING AN INVENTORY OF INTERPRETIVE FRAMES

The insights reviewed above were employed as the foundations of the deductive-cum-inductive procedure carried out in the aforementioned doctoral research project (Pareschi 2019; for similar approaches, see Meyer and Höllerer 2010; Huang 1995). The deductive stage closely inspected the framing categories identified within each proposed classification. Their respective 'idea elements', methodically written down on pieces of notepaper, were then arranged and rearranged in clusters on a broad board, until a preliminary but exhaustive list of working frames was outlined. As already mentioned, the inductive stage then applied the inventory to the elite-level and mass-level textual corpora; as the actors' statements were deconstructed into idea elements, the ones that proved 'new' were also noted on paper and added to the clusters on the board, contributing to a redefinition of the frames through back-and-forth iteration.

The overall tally of identified frames increased and the content of each frame became at once more precise and broader, as the statements of elites and citizens – expressed through different linguistic registers – were distilled in cyclical steps into a catalogue of 16 interpretations of the EU. The outcomes are synthesised in Table 1. Admittedly, certain frames parallel attitudes already probed in some fashion by traditional surveys. Yet, they can properly 'be considered as explaining reactions towards European integration only if people justify their perceptions of European integration with reasons likely to be interpreted as indicators of such attitudes' (Gaxie 2011a: 11). In principle, even a frame apparently characterised by an ingrained slant may happen to be wielded in any direction: each empirical instance may therefore be coded as 'positive', 'negative', 'ambivalent' or 'neutral'. Hence, a frame can prove less or more 'contested', depending on whether its actual usage is consistently linked to a specific orientation or fragmented into different orientations.

Table 1: Frames of interpretation of the EU and European integration

Frames of interpretation of the EU	
• Sovereignty, supranationalism, rules	• Utilitarian (economy/single market)
• National and European democracy	• Utilitarian (immigration/society)
• Rights	• Model (economy/single market)
• Europe as modernity	• Model (free movement/immigration)
• Identity and tradition	• Peaceful relations and cooperation
• Social Europe	• International stage
• Economically liberal Europe	• Value for money and waste
• Utilitarian (individual)	• Political effectiveness

Sovereignty, supranationalism and rules encompasses matters of self-determination and loss thereof, acceptance of political Europe and pooling of sovereignty, but also emphasis on EU 'rules' or the influence exerted by foreign powers through the EU. *National and European democracy* provides a distinct focal point, substantiated by attributing an 'undemocratic' nature to the EU, by stressing domestic democratic improvements brought by EU membership, by comparing national and European democracy, or by highlighting the European Parliament's activities. Another frame links the EU to the promotion or the preservation of *Rights* – such as human rights, consumer rights, workers' rights – or to their imperilment, or even to their alleged abuse allegedly encouraged by the European courts.

Europe as modernity and *Identity and tradition* are sociocultural frames, largely capturing interpretations of European integration in line with the GAL/TAN divide. The former groups perceptions anchored in environmentalism, humanitarian values and cultural openness – for instance stressing health, safety and environment regulation – or espousal of a European identity. Instead, the latter chiefly reflects concerns and appeals linked to national identity and strong in-group feelings, or cultural animosity towards immigration. Cleavage-based views of the EU are also conveyed through *Social Europe* and *Economically liberal Europe*. The former frame corresponds to references – of varying ideological thickness – to labour, jobs, workers and working conditions, as well as transnational economic solidarity. The latter reveals a source's adhesion to *laissez faire*, deregulation and other tenets of neoliberalism, or their emphasis on strengthened ordoliberal governance especially within the Eurozone.

Utilitarianism is voiced in three separate versions. *Utilitarian (individual)* revolves around the impact of European integration on a person's life, family and immediate milieu. *Utilitarian (economy/single market)* evaluates the EU through elements such as consequences for national companies, the cost of membership, agriculture and fisheries, the internal market, and so on and so forth, weighing costs and benefits for the country or, possibly, a more restricted territorial community or a sectoral grouping. *Utilitarian (immigration/society)* displays the same reasoning and situated perspective, but stresses how the free movement of foreigners affects employment, social services, crime or the society in general.

Conversely, *Model (economy/single market)* and *Model (free movement/immigration)* consider the EU in its entirety, not as a factor influencing a lower-level polity or group. The former frame gathers scarcely ideological interpretations of the EU that address its economic agency or its trade policy, for example by lamenting the absence of a veritable level playing field or by asserting that too diverse economies will never be made to work together. Systemic viewpoints related to freedom of movement or to migration fall under the latter frame.

As for the international side, *Peaceful relations and cooperation* incorporates views of European integration related to the role of the EU in fostering unprecedented peace, but also emphasis on *détente* and cooperation (or lack thereof) within Europe. *International stage* encompasses the manifold relationship between Europe and the global arena: from wariness of its possible 'militarisation' to distrust of its double standards vis-à-vis foreign powers, from European countries' say in the world to development aid.

Finally, two frames arise from instrumentality. *Value for money and waste* frames the EU as a factor delivering efficiency or, on the contrary, as an overly bureaucratic and wasteful entity. *Political effectiveness* encapsulates perceptions about its relative effectiveness in solving problems, especially as regards the most pressing and salient political issues, and about the (un)wieldy character of its configuration.

A FRAME-BASED APPROACH TO 'EU ISSUE CONGRUENCE'

The frame-based approach proposed in this article promptly finds a primary application. According to postfunctionalist theory (Hooghe and Marks 2009), 'constraining dissensus' plays a crucial part in the deeply troubled stage currently experienced by the process of integration, as the attitudes shown by more divided and tepid national public opinions restrain their political elites. Moreover, 'the unprecedented development in supranational governance in recent years has led to greater public contestation, yet at the same time the Union is more reliant on public support for its continued legitimacy than ever before' (De Vries 2018: 5, emphasis in original). Unsurprisingly, within studies of 'issue congruence' between the represented and their representatives, analyses specifically targeting 'EU issue congruence' – through established mass and elite surveys like the European Election Studies – have burgeoned (Pareschi, Giglioli and Baldini 2022). However, beside the fact that 'there is no natural metric with which to measure the gap and no certainty about what kind of divergence between elites and the masses will result in trouble', lingering conceptual and methodological pitfalls have engendered a 'peaceful coexistence of research results and conclusions' (Müller,

Jenny and Ecker 2012: 168-169; see also Real-Dato 2017). Besides, works aiming to explain such opinion gaps have mostly reported negative findings (e.g. Dolný and Baboš 2015).

Given these difficulties, carrying out frame-based evaluations of 'EU issue congruence' – by reconceptualising attitudes towards European integration as frames – may prove especially fruitful. The connection between such kind of attitudes and substantive representation remains watertight. In fact, issue framing has been argued to constitute 'a central aspect of the "conversation" between elites and citizens in a democracy' (Nelson and Kinder 1996: 1074); and according to another account, 'to find politicians framing, cueing, and priming, and to find citizens forming preferences in response to that activity, is merely to find both exercising the practice of representation, understood in the iterative sense' (Disch 2011: 109). Like conventional assessments, a frame-based analysis can compare attitudes at country level, between whole political classes and their national populations, or at party level, between political parties and their supporters.

To that end, the inventory of frames presented above shall serve as a unified structure of coding, to be applied to textual data collected at both mass and elite level in order to detect such frames' respective diffusion. Very few similar studies exist, and none relates to European integration. The closest predecessor in thematic terms might be Larsen's (1999) comparison of the approaches of British and Danish elites and citizens towards the European level during the 1990s. However, Larsen selectively relied on in-depth contextual knowledge in the shape of available opinion polls, official documents and declarations. A reference point in methodological terms is Huang's (1995) rare effort to compare 'media frames' with 'audience frames' on the Anita Hill/Clarence Thomas controversy which took place in the US in 1991. After collecting newspaper and TV stories and submitting two open-ended questions to adult citizens via telephone, Huang iteratively developed common coding categories and interpretative frames through multiple readings. Of course, a frame-based evaluation of EU issue congruence differs in that Europe is an abstract, long-lasting bone of contention, not a singular event.

As regards mass-level data collection, targeting representative samples of national adult populations in line with current research practices remains key to sound statistical inference. Thus, the central prescription vis-à-vis traditional surveys concerns the nature of the necessary items to be included. As a minimum, a question like the one exploited by Stoeckel (2013) should routinely probe the meaning(s) attributed to the EU, offering an exhaustive range of response categories. Another route, gently tilting the balance towards further induction, encourages the usage of open-ended items, advocated by constructivist researchers together with yet more 'qualitative' instruments such as semi-structured interviews and focus groups (Gamson 1988). Reliance on open-ended questions, incidentally, has steadily featured in experimental studies of framing (e.g. Valkenburg, Semetko and De Vreese 1999).

As for elite-level data collection, parallel inclusion of the mentioned Eurobarometer item into the most renowned elite surveys would be welcome. Indeed, the combination of independent surveys of citizens and legislators exploiting identically worded items would be highly convenient, although the eventuality of 'differential item functioning' (Golder and Stramski 2010) cannot be discounted. Otherwise, at least six sources could provide textual data suitable for coding and extraction of frames: i) newspaper articles or TV newscasts; ii) press agencies' news reports; iii) political parties' official statements; iv) party leaders' speeches; v) parliamentary debates; vi) political actors' social media pages. As each alternative displays strengths and weaknesses, triangulation would be preferable. Some options yield evidence to be channelled into either country-level or party-level assessments, whereas others only allow for the latter option.

In this regard, social scientists have long treated the mass media as 'a window through which to gain insight into the positions of political parties, interest groups and citizens and as a data source for studying how well these different positions are reflected in national public debates' (De Wilde, Teney and Lacewell 2018: 51-52). Specifically, the press has frequently supplied the default option in studies of 'frames in communication' (Matthes 2009; Chong and

Druckman 2007). Selecting a set of quality newspapers – based on criteria like diffusion and ideological diversity, in addition to relative objectivity – guarantees reliability in representation of the public discourse, continuous availability through preservation in electronic databases, and homogeneous applicability across national contexts (for a discussion and an applied example, see Helbling, Hoeglenger and Wüest 2010). Moreover, a textual corpus composed of politicians' statements reported by newspapers over a certain period consists by design of a weighted average of sorts (Pareschi 2019). For instance, it gathers the voices of numerous political exponents, within a country or a party, while reflecting their different levels of prominence; in addition to this, occasions in which political actors deliberately evoke EU matters are blended with circumstances in which declarations are reactively prompted by external events.

At a lower level, two interlocked research decisions entailed by textual data analysis concern the unit of observation. Should it be a single proposition, or a whole text? And should it be associated with one frame only, or potentially harbour multiple frames? In principle, the lengthier the unit of observation, the higher the probability that multiple frames will emerge from it. Furthermore, inasmuch as ambivalence characterises a source's views – *inter alia* in terms of the joint presence of diverse frames – researchers should prize its detection. Thus, the aforementioned doctoral research (Pareschi 2019) chose as its unit of observation at mass level each interviewee's whole answer to an open-ended question on the meaning(s) of the EU; at elite level, it relied on the totality of propositions attributable to each political exponent within each selected newspaper article. Concerning the second decision, the study deemed it plausible to find a single proposition framing the EU in distinct ways or, on the contrary, a single frame articulated through multiple propositions, some of which could in fact be understandable only in context. Thus, for example, reference to the rights of workers within a unit of observation could be coded at both frames *Rights* and *Social Europe*.

Finally, according to established consensus 'checks for intercoder reliability are imperative when manual coding is used' (Chong and Druckman 2007: 108; see the review in Matthes 2009). Huang (1995), Valkenburg, Semetko and De Vreese (1999) and Helbling, Hoeglenger and Wüest (2010), among others, reported on the procedures employed to ensure inter-coder reliability. Such procedures often involve the parallel coding of a subsample of the textual corpora by multiple coders, resulting in a percentage of agreement or an akin indicator.

CONCLUSIONS

Do the ruling classes and the ordinary citizens of EU member states live in the same European worlds, as Thomassen and Schmitt (1999) would put it? Frequent opinion polls gauge the attitudes of national populations towards European integration, and those of their political representatives are also surveyed on occasion. Yet, no systematic endeavour has ever examined whether and to what extent the EU is actually interpreted in similar ways at the two levels. This is astounding, both because the diverse outcomes of recent European crises have strongly problematised the *framing* of the EU (Börzel and Risse 2018), and because related considerations arise in real-world debates at each and every critical juncture. In the run-up to the Brexit referendum, for instance, the *Guardian* had asked for contributions from its foreign readership:

to explore how the EU is viewed throughout the union, and what it means in other European countries. What do people talk about in your country when the subject of the EU is raised: democracy, migration, bureaucracy, free movement, security, strategic alliances? (Marsh 2016)

This article has contended that revamped reliance on 'frames of interpretation' would precisely provide the instruments enabling such a systematic research effort across European countries. Consequently, it has issued a plea for the relaunch of frame analysis in the study of attitudes towards European integration, with special reference to assessments of mass-elite correspondence and discrepancy.

Firstly, I have dwelled on the open-ended and multifaceted nature of European integration, in historical terms and in its relationship with the main dimensions of political competition in EU member states. Secondly, I have considered how different national experiences with the EU and ambivalent thinking about it have at once enabled and complicated appropriation of the European issue across the continent. As Stoeckel concluded, 'future theorizing on the opinions of Europeans should recognize that [the constraining] dissensus on European integration exists in many citizens' minds' (Stoeckel 2013: 41). In fact, even the mainstream of contemporary EU studies – notwithstanding the paucity of analyses directly focusing on frames – has expressed awareness of the relevance of framing processes (Hooghe and Marks 2007).

Highlighting the versatile nature of frames as analytical tools, the article has defined them as distinct viewpoints on what the EU is or does. On this basis, I have reviewed a number of studies serving as a baseline for the construction of a comprehensive list of interpretive frames. The inventory, resulting from a deductive-cum-inductive procedure developed in iterative steps, includes 16 ideal-typical frames: from *Sovereignty*, *supranationalism*, *rules to Europe as modernity*, from *Utilitarian (immigration/society)* to *Model (economy/single market)*, from *International stage* to *Political effectiveness*. Finally, I have debated research practices to be implemented by future, frame-based analyses of mass-elite congruence on EU matters.

Three additional avenues for further research stand out. First, recent works on Euroscepticism have called attention to its diffusion beyond party systems and public opinions, in loci such as the media, interest groups and social movements (Usherwood and Startin 2013; Vasilopoulou 2013; Leconte 2010). However, the catch-all notion of Euroscepticism remains problematic, as '[n]umerous authors unsatisfied with [it] forge neologisms which seem more appropriate to particular aspects of their object or of the context under study' (Crespy and Verschuere 2009: 382). Conversely, an inclusive catalogue of frames appears well-suited to 'travelling' across European countries, matching and describing through its balanced flexibility the wide gamut of views of the EU displayed by different kinds of political actors.

Second, frame-based research is equipped to assess which interpretations prevail within the 'issue field' of each EU member state (Meyer and Höllerer 2010), where the totality of relevant actors – not only the ones that pertain to the political realm – engage in framing contests over the meanings to be conferred upon European integration. Subject to appropriate data collection, it shall be possible to reconstruct for each country – through homogeneous categories that enable cross-national comparison – the specific balance in the mixture of employed frames that constitutes the 'issue culture'. Moreover, techniques such as Multiple Correspondence Analysis could map types of actors, frames and orientations simultaneously, to catch sight of the dynamics lying behind the generation of meanings (for a similar design, see Meyer and Höllerer 2010).

Third, prospective developments relate to mass-level attitudes. Certainly, the detection of frames in citizens' minds calls for explanation of their cognitive, demographic, social and behavioural antecedents, in a way that parallels extant literature (Hobolt and De Vries 2016). In this vein, Huang (1995) singled out through statistical techniques the main individual-level drivers behind reliance on each identified 'audience frame'. Furthermore, Vasilopoulou called for '[e]xperimental settings that would examine the relationship between [...] citizen exposure to stimuli related to different aspects of European integration and [...] political attitudes and behaviour at the domestic level' (Vasilopoulou 2018: 32). Indeed, numerous experimental analyses have inspected the relationship between properties of interpretative frames – 'accessibility', 'applicability' and 'strength' – and their respective leverage on the public (Chong and Druckman 2007). However, although research on the European issue has recently resorted to experimental designs, it is largely found wanting in regard to frames themselves, even though a Brexit-related exception probed the impact exerted on Leave/Remain preferences by positive and negative versions of a 'cultural', an 'economic' and a 'political' frame (Goodwin, Hix and Pickup 2020). Enhanced awareness of the variety of plausible frames of interpretation of the EU should spur such experimental research, while endowing it with theoretically stable foundations.

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Research Article

To Tie Each Other's Hands: Italy Negotiating the Introduction of Constitutional Balanced Budget Rules and Independent Fiscal Institutions (2010-2013)

Federico Bonomi

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Abstract

This article presents an in-depth qualitative case study on the negotiations underlying the introduction of an Independent Fiscal Institution and a Constitutional Balanced Budget Rule in Italy. The article looks at the interests of the relevant actors in the negotiation process of the Six Pack, Euro Plus Pact, Treaty on Stability, Coordination and Governance, and Two Pack by conducting interviews with the negotiators and analyses of parliamentary records and press declarations. The article demonstrates that functional mechanisms explain the outcome of such negotiations better than the consolidated literature of Liberal Intergovernmentalism, which expects that the preferences of the constellation of national actors are the key drivers of EU grand bargains impacting on member states' core state powers. As a matter of fact, Italian negotiators decided to accept the introduction of such instruments because they were potentially helpful in reducing macroeconomic risks both domestically and in other EU member states without having particular political costs, and not because domestic actors showcased clear preferences in favour of them. The results contribute to the academic debate on the integration of the Economic and Monetary Union by testing hypotheses deriving from traditional EU integration and International Relations literature and paves the way for future research allowing for a greater generalisation.

Keywords

Economic and Monetary Union; Constitutional balanced budget rules; Independent fiscal institutions; EU integration; Negotiations

As the European Commission is planning to set a consensus on a new EU fiscal framework to cope with the massive economic consequences of the Covid-19 crisis (European Commission 2021), academics and policymakers have engaged in a broader discussion on the current rules and their capability to preserve macroeconomic stability and public debt sustainability in the EU, especially the Eurozone (Mileusnic 2021). In a context of revamping economic integration proposals, it becomes more relevant than ever to understand the rationale of the Economic and Monetary Union (EMU) integration in the last decade. This article contributes to such discussion by looking at the negotiations underlying the introduction of an Independent Fiscal Institution (IFI) – the Parliamentary Budget Office (PBO) – and a Constitutional Balanced Budget Rule (CBBR) in Italy between 2010 and 2013.

The reason why Italy is chosen for the case study is that, at first glance, it is the least likely EU member state willing to accept tighter fiscal constraints on the national level. The high debt-GDP and deficit-GDP ratios the country had been displaying (Spaventa 2013) made it particularly difficult for policymakers to introduce a CBBR. Moreover, in previous years, Italian elites had shown strong resistance to the idea of introducing an IFI (Balassone, Franco and Goretti 2013). A single, in-depth, case study allows for the testing of contrasting hypotheses in order to explain why such a process took place. The hypotheses reflect a classical distinction in the literature on EU integration between domestic and functional approaches.

The article provides, first, a historical background and literature review, outlines then the research design and, finally, discusses findings and conclusions.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND AND LITERATURE REVIEW

The history of EU fiscal rules begins in 1992 with the Maastricht Treaty, which introduced a mechanism for coordinating national economic policies, corresponding to the current articles 121 to 126 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU). The mechanism was strengthened by the Stability and Growth Pact (SGP) and its 2005 reform (Saravalle 2020). Such rules, however, faced problems of compliance (Rae Baerg and Hallerberg 2016; Hansen 2015; European Fiscal Board 2019), and the euro crisis of 2009 challenged the whole system (Schuknecht, Moutot, Rother and Stark 2011). As a response, after meeting within the Task Force on Economic Governance (TFEG) – a temporary group summoned by the European Council to shape the reforms of the EMU governance – member states agreed to introduce new mechanisms at the supranational level in order to increase compliance with EU fiscal rules. The result was a set of five regulations, part of the 2011 Six Pack (Amttenbrink 2015), and Regulation 472/2013 of the Two Pack, which built upon the SGP and its reform. However, they also agreed to give such rules a direct implementation in national legal systems (Adams, Fabbrini and Larouche 2014) through IFIs and CBBRs, in order to make the European requirements on national budgetary policies 'self-enforcing' (Buti, Eijffinger and Franco 2008: 152). IFIs were required by Directive 2011/85/EU of the Six Pack and strengthened by Regulation 473/2013 of the Two Pack. Member states weakly committed to introducing CBBRs in the European Council conclusions of 24/25 March 2011 (the Euro Plus Pact) and required introducing them in the Treaty on Stability, Coordination and Governance (TSCG) within one year of the Treaty's entering in force.

The decision-making process underlying the adoption of these acts did not take place without contestations and member states of the then EU-27 showed different preferences. Some countries decided to withdraw from the agreements or not to comply. Directive 2011/85 was not binding for the UK, and Poland never created its own IFI. The UK and the Czech Republic – the latter only initially – opted out from the ratification of the TSCG. The Euro Plus Pact was not signed by the Czech Republic, Hungary, Sweden or the UK. Regulation 473/2013 applies only to Eurozone countries. On the other hand, in the group of countries which opted in, there are member states with different approaches to EMU integration (Wasserfallen, Leuffen, Kudrna and Degner 2019), different exposure to the financial crisis (Copelovitch, Frieden and Walter 2016), and different historical experiences with fiscal rules and institutions (OECD 2018). For example, the Netherlands Bureau for Economic Policy Analysis (CPB) began operating in 1945 and boasts 'a strong reputation of independence and competence in Dutch

society' (Bos and Teulings 2013), while in 2011 the Hungarian parliament dismantled the Hungarian Fiscal Council (Kopits and Romhanyi 2013). The new rules and institutions were also subject to *ex post* controversies: some scholars argue that these reforms are one of the causes of the growth of populism and Euroscepticism in the EU (Hobolt and de Vries 2016; Hernández and Kriesi 2016), and some Eurosceptic parties, like the Italian League, proposed to repeal the CBBR (Camera dei Deputati 2020).

Overall, the introduction of both IFIs and CBBRs constitutes a case of depoliticisation (Flinders and Buller 2006), as they constrain the leeway of nationally elected politicians as to decide levels of public spending. The creation of IFIs empowers technical officials, whose presence in that crucial field of national sovereignty challenges the principle of separation of powers and bypasses the traditional channels of political legitimation (Vibert 2007). The insertion of a debt brake at the constitutional level goes beyond the principle of primacy of EU law, as it *de facto* Europeanises national constitutions, whose reform had always remained a national prerogative (Bifulco and Roselli 2013). Overall, the whole process raises issues of political legitimacy (Tesche 2019b; Dawson, Enderlein, and Joerges 2015) and accountability (Scharpf 2017), also because it has no comparable case in history. As a matter of fact, whenever states decided to give up national prerogatives in fiscal policies, they only did it in favour of a federal structure. For instance, in the last decade of the 18th century, the American federal administration was given the powers to stabilise the finances of the states (Steinbach 2015; Gaspar 2015) and debt brakes were voluntarily introduced for the first time in some states in 1846 (Fabbrini 2013). EU member states did not undertake such an evolution, rather chose to tie each other's fiscal policies without making a federation. For all these reasons, IFIs and fiscal rules have become more and more relevant in the academic and policy debate (Tesche 2019a; Larch and Braendle 2017; Horvath 2018; Debrun and Kumar 2007; Beetsma and Debrun 2016).

The case of Italy was analysed by Moschella (2017), who inquired as to why the country decided to accept the provisions of the TSCG, demonstrating that the choice of the government was determined by fears of retaliation from the markets. This decision was also influenced by the logic of path-dependency (i.e. the fact that the TSCG was a condition for introducing the European Stability Mechanism – ESM), the pro-European attitude of the government, and a solid supporting majority in the parliament. This article builds on Moschella's investigations by including IFIs, testing more specific hypotheses, and making use of different data.

RESEARCH DESIGN

This section introduces the research question and theoretical background underlying two alternative explanations of the phenomenon, describes the causal mechanisms linking the independent and dependent variables, designs the hypotheses, illustrates the sources of information and discusses why other theoretical frameworks were not used.

The research question is formulated in the following way: Which factors explain Italy's position in favour of the requirement for EU member states to have in place IFIs and CBBRs in their own legal system in the period 2010-2013?

To provide an answer, the article tests two contrasting explanations: a functional explanation and a domestic one. The functional explanation is borrowed from the legalisation theory (Kahler 2000), as Schelkle (2007) and Hodson (2018) demonstrate the possibility of testing legalisation hypotheses in the field of EU fiscal governance. The domestic explanation, on the contrary, is drawn from Liberal Intergovernmentalism (LI) (Moravcsik and Schimmelfennig 2009).

According to the functional explanation, governments are expected to accept the introduction of 'more legalised institutions', in this case IFIs and CBBRs, 'because they solve particular problems of commitment or collective action, increasing the prospective benefits from cooperation', and, at the same time, they 'must weigh the costs imposed by legalisation' (Kahler 2000: 663). Compliance with EU fiscal rules is a matter of commitment and collective

action, not only because, as article 120 TFEU states, member states' economic policies are a matter of common concern, but also because compliance can reduce macroeconomic risks in every country (Bénassy-Quéré, Brunnermeier, Enderlein, Farhi et al. 2018) and prevent spillover effects (Constancio 2012) due, for instance, to the interdependence of banking systems (Hall 2012). Legalised institutions have also a direct positive effect on risk reduction because they make the commitments to the EU fiscal rules more credible (Weale 2015: 187). In order to test whether IFIs and CBBRs were requested in negotiations to resolve a commitment or collective action problem, it is first necessary that governments are aware of such problems. Second, governments should be persuaded that IFIs and CBBRs are the best way to solve such problems, either domestically or in other member states. Both pieces of information can be obtained through interviews, debates and press releases.

Regarding costs, Kahler (2000: 664) states that they 'are not immutable and careful measurement requires that they cannot be used automatically to account for unexplained resistance to legalisation'. This suggests that costs are subject to the perceptions of decision-makers. Finding no or sporadic mentions around IFIs and CBBRs in domestic debates is necessary in understanding whether they were perceived as costly or not. If a member state is finalising, or already complies with, IFI and CBBR introduction before EU negotiations, it is likely that it will face minor to no adaptation efforts and therefore domestic policymakers will likely perceive fewer costs. To look at the costs, parliamentary debates and press releases are the most suitable source. On the EU side, the fewer the costs perceived by domestic policymakers, the less likely negotiators are expected to be concerned about them in negotiations. This information can only be obtained through interviews, as negotiations proceedings are classified.

The first hypothesis is formulated in this way:

H₁: The more IFIs and CBBRs' benefits in terms of commitment or collective action outweigh their implementation costs, the more likely Italy will prefer them in negotiations.

Given that costs and benefits are difficult to compare, the main hypothesis can be subdivided into two sub-hypotheses, according to benefits and costs. Either the confirmation of both sub-hypotheses or the confirmation of one without the falsification of the other would confirm the main hypothesis:

H_{1.1}: The more IFIs and CBBRs solve commitment or collective action problems, the more likely Italy will prefer them in negotiations.

H_{1.2}: The lower the implementation cost of IFIs and CBBRs, the more likely Italy will prefer them in negotiations.

On the other hand, the domestic explanation expects that the preferences of domestic actors – which include members of parliament, political parties, governmental agencies, bureaucrats, trade unions and business associations – shape the preferences of governments during negotiations (Wiener and Diez 2009). LI gives a clear explanation of three phases of the process of integration: the formation of preferences at the national level, supranational bargaining, and institutional choice (Moravcsik 1998). Since during negotiations member states and intergovernmental institutions tended to monopolise agenda setting and decision-making (Fabbrini and Puetter 2016; Hodson 2011), LI was more suitable than other theories which put the supranational agency at the centre. LI was developed in a historical period in which most of the process of European integration regarded regulatory issues (Majone 1996), rather than the core of national sovereignty. On the contrary, between 2010 and 2013, changes impacted on national fiscal policies, with noticeable distributional effects (Genschel and Jachtenfuchs 2014). Nevertheless, LI proved to be resilient enough to assess most of the EU institutional evolutions after the eurozone crisis (Schimmelfennig 2018a; 2018b; 2015a). Moreover, as Moravcsik (2018: 1656) mentioned in one of his latest articles on LI, 'such domestic incorporation is even more consistent with Liberal IR theory than are regime-theoretical

mechanisms', calling for a further elaboration in order to make LI even more complete, as Phelan (2018) did in the case of human rights.

The observable implications for verifying the domestic hypothesis are the following. First, IFIs and CBBRs should be salient for domestic actors. Second, these actors should take a position on the issue before relevant EU summits. Third, the national government should conduct the negotiations taking care of negotiating an outcome as close as possible with domestic preferences. The first and second observations can be found in parliamentary debates and press declarations, while the second mainly through interviews. Failing to meet these three observable implications will undermine the capability of the LI-derived framework in explaining the outcome under analysis.

This hypothesis is framed in this way:

H₂: The more domestic actors desire IFIs and CBBRs, the more likely Italy will prefer them in negotiations.

The hypotheses, drawn from existing literature, are tested through theory-testing Process Tracing (Beach and Pedersen 2013), with the ambition of either verifying or falsifying causal mechanisms found in the existing literature, thus linking independent variables with the outcome by finding key observable implications.

Overall, the analysis relies on 145 documents from the parliament, both *Camera dei Deputati* and *Senato della Repubblica*, 172 newspaper articles with relevant declarations, and 12 anonymous elite interviews, as documented in the Annex. The predominance of information regarding domestic actors is due, primarily, to an issue of data availability, however, such information can be used to understand the position of negotiators as well.

Other important theories are not suitable for the purpose of this article, due to an overall problem of dependent variables. This is a well-known issue, as it has always been difficult to conceptualise European integration in an unequivocal way and produce a theory that can be generalised enough to include all of its causes and consequences (Rosamond 2000; Chryssochoou 2001). Neo-functional definitions of integration cannot be used as they expect new centralised institutions to be created or developed (Wiener and Diez 2009). For example, Haas (1958: 16) defined European integration as:

the process whereby political actors in several distinct national settings are persuaded to shift their loyalties, expectations, and political activities toward a new centre, whose institutions possess or demand jurisdiction over the pre-existing national states. The end result of a process of political integration is a new political community, superimposed over the pre-existing ones.

Lindberg (1963: 6), on the other hand, intended integration as 'the process whereby nations forego the desire and ability to conduct foreign and domestic policies independently of each other, seeking instead to make joint decisions or to delegate the decision-making process to new central organs'. Both definitions, which are at the basis of contemporary neo-functional theories, do not fit the introduction of IFIs and CBBRs, as the process which takes place in this case is rather one of decentralisation. Moreover, it can be argued that integration occurred with the establishment of the Maastricht convergence criteria, and that the creation of new fiscal rules and institutions constitutes only a better implementation of such criteria. For these reasons, neo-functional theories were discarded, and for the sake of simplicity, related factors like learning mechanisms and spillover effects were left out of this analysis.

This same shortcoming applies to new-intergovernmentalism, which expects governments to prefer *de novo* bodies over traditional supranational actors when they delegate powers (Bickerton, Hodson and Puetter 2015). The literature usually refers to *de novo* bodies as supranational agencies (Scipioni 2018), hence this definition cannot be extended to rules and institutions at the national level. Moreover, new-intergovernmentalism has been criticised

because it does not take into account the considerable intergovernmental conflicts on institutional design (Schimmelfennig 2015b).

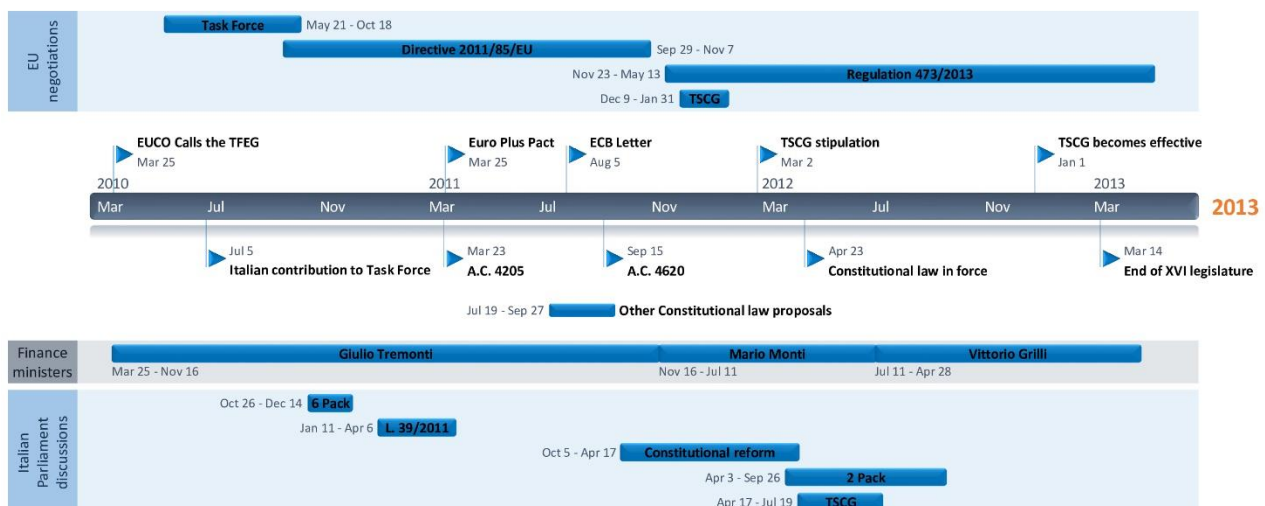
Europeanisation approaches are not suitable, as well. For instance, Börzel (2002) develops a theory on why Europeanisation takes place and how member states react to it, without expecting any integration to happen. However, it has some pitfalls that prevent this theory from being used for the framework of this article. First, Börzel's contribution is designed to look at regulatory issues rather than at core state powers. Börzel (2002: 196) explains Europeanisation as a way for 'national governments to address problems which preoccupy their constituencies but can no longer be dealt with effectively at the domestic level (e.g., organized crime, environmental pollution, or immigration)'. Fiscal policy would hardly fall into the same domain of such policies. Another pitfall is that the concept of Europeanisation – which presupposes the agency of supranational institutions – fails to include the TSCG, which is a purely intergovernmental treaty, and gives no room for dissenting member states to opt out. The process of integration of the EMU is more intricate than a simple, linear negotiation on any conventional EU regulatory issue, hence it requires a theory that can encapsulate all its specificities.

Finally, theories deriving from historical institutionalism (Thelen 1999; Pierson 2004), which could bring interesting elements that could explain why and how institutions or rules evolve historically, are incompatible with this research design as they take an institution-centred perspective rather than an actor-centred approach, as this article does.

FINDINGS

This section presents the main findings of the research. After a brief historical introduction, each sub-section discusses the main observations about IFIs and CBBRs in Italy and their implications on the verification or falsification of the hypotheses. Figure 1 displays the timeline of the events.

Figure 1: Events timeline



The Introduction and Strengthening of an IFI

The debate on the creation of an IFI in Italy predates the EMU reforms. In 2004, a study of the European Commission suggested the creation of an IFI in every EU member state (Sapir, Aghion, Bertola, Hellwig, et al. 2004). In 2005, the IMF proposed that 'a permanent Independent Fiscal Council of leading experts should be established to evaluate budget proposals and trends and stimulate a debate on fiscal issues' (International Monetary Fund 2005). The request of the IMF followed a broad academic consensus on the role of IFIs in enhancing the sustainability of public finances but remained unanswered and was not translated into law (Interview 9). The discussion begins with the parliament, moves on to the perspective of the government and negotiators, and finally explores the position of other domestic actors.

Parliament

The first occasion in which the Italian parliament had the opportunity to discuss the creation of an IFI was the budgetary law reform 196/2009 (Senato della Repubblica 2009). In the first reading, the Budget Committee of the *Senato* discussed two amendments creating an IFI. The first proposed a bicameral committee on the transparency of public accounts, while the second proposed an independent authority. The first amendment was criticised insofar as it was not compatible with the Italian form of government, while the second because there were no positive examples in other countries (Interview 10). The latter received immediate opposition from the vice-minister of economy and finance Vegas and the chairman of the Budget Committee of the Senate, Azzollini, while the first was approved by the Committee and welcomed by Vegas. Nevertheless, the *Camera* rejected the proposal and the unification of the parliamentary budget services received scarce attention (Camera dei Deputati 2009).

The discussions on IFIs continued in October 2010, when the parliament was notified about the proposals of the Six Pack by the European Commission. In previous meetings, IFIs were not salient (D1; D4; D5). The provisions of the Six Pack forced the Italian parliament to amend its budgetary processes within one year after Law 196/2009. The Foreign Affairs Committee of the *Senato* strongly supported an Italian IFI (D6), and the Budget Committee expressed general appreciation as well (D7; D9). In a discussion in the plenary of the *Senato*, the issue was touched upon three times, with appreciation from both members of the majority and the opposition (D12; D13). Finally, the Committees of the *Senato* and the *Camera* heard the vice-DG of the Italian central Bank, Visco, where MPs again expressed their approval (D20).

Nevertheless, in the discussion of the Six Pack, the issue was not salient in key meetings. First, it was not debated during the hearing of minister of economy and finance Tremonti and EU Commissioner Rehn (D19). Second, in the *Camera* IFIs were not discussed at all (D18). Therefore, the Italian parliament exerted no explicit influence on the government in the negotiations within the TFEG. The Italian government proposed its contribution to the TFEG on July 5, while the parliamentary discussions on the reforms of EMU started on 26 October, eight days following the last meeting of the TFEG.

The next step was the reform of Law 196/2009 implementing the indications of the TFEG. In that period, the Council was discussing the directive 2011/85/EU, reaching a general agreement on 15 March. Discussions about the reform of Law 196/2009 lasted from 11 January to 16 April 2011. This time around, the legislative procedure was started in the *Camera*, but independent institutions were discussed not even once (D24; D40; D41). It was, again, the *Senato* that touched on the topic, and the same amendments creating a committee and an authority were proposed. Azzollini supported the first proposal with some caveats, while the second was rejected by a large majority (D43; D47; D48; D51). During the debate in the plenary, senators engaged in a broad discussion on IFIs, where strong arguments in favour of independent institutions emerged. Notwithstanding these positions, all the amendments were once again rejected. Apart from some procedural considerations by Azzollini, no MPs opposed the creation of an independent institution *per se*. The clash was about which model to create, and the crossfire between such models prevented the *Senato* from agreeing on one

single proposal (D56; D57). The *Camera* therefore received a text from the *Senato* which contained no references to independent institutions and approved the Law without discussions about IFIs (D58). One Senator from the opposition commented on the resistance he witnessed:

It was the classic 'deaf resistance', the most terrible one to overcome, the one that only those who have been in a parliament know just how mortal it is. ... The battle to build the IFI had some well-known champions, while there were no explicit standard-bearers in the resistance, nevertheless the decision was not being made because nobody wanted to make it. (Interview 10)

In the 2009, 2010 and 2011 discussions, the majority of MPs did not support the government in its request for IFIs, initially, because they opposed a similar solution, and later on, because the topic was not salient, and the parliament could not contribute to the negotiations. Such facts do not meet the expectations of the domestic hypothesis and do not falsify the functional one.

On occasion of the Constitutional reform, the Committees of the *Camera* heard several experts, some of which mentioned the creation of an independent institution. Two of them proposed the committee model (D69), two others stated that it was required to enforce the principle of balanced budget and that it should be given constitutional recognition (D71). The Italian Comptroller General mentioned that the *Ragioneria Generale* could perform that role (D73). Apart from a statement by Hon. Tassone and an ironic comment by President of the Budget Committee of the House Giorgetti, there was no vocal opposition to IFIs. During the discussions in the various Committees, there was no relevant mention of independent institutions (D74), but the issue was widely debated in the plenary. In that venue, two models were debated: the parliamentary institution and the stability council, a new name for the independent authority. This latter was opposed by an overwhelming majority of 504 votes. The parliamentary model was more fortunate. Hon. Cambursano made the point that this model would have maximised the prerogatives of the parliament and fulfilled the requests of Directive 2011/85 EU. Fierce opposition came from MPs belonging to small parliamentary groups or else dissenting from their own, thus the amendment passed with 385 in favour out of 406 votes cast (D80; D81; D83). After the approval, the discussion passed to the *Senato*, which almost unanimously welcomed the text coming from the *Camera*. A large majority of the *Senato* voted in favour of the constitutional reform in the first reading (D92; D93). Definitive approval of the reform in the second reading took place between 5 March and 17 April 2011, supported by a majority large enough to make a popular referendum unnecessary (D97; D98; D101; D104; D108).

Final approval of the IFI in the constitutional reform was welcomed by a Senator from the majority, who declared that:

The clash inside the parliamentary committees was about the best way to introduce such an important reform, because creating a new instrument to control the government is never simple. Senator Morando proposed several times a solution which has always been welcomed by the MPs, and over time the government changed its idea. ... We acted tactically all together in the Committee to see the approval of the IFI. (Interview 11)

Such a positive attitude by the MPs, however, does not support the domestic hypothesis, as the implementation of the IFI occurred after its negotiation at the EU level. On the contrary, the functional hypothesis received some strong confirmation, as implementation costs were reduced due to the EU requirement, and MPs were aware of this. One of them said that 'only when it was possible to rely on the favour of the EU, did we succeed in building a parliamentary majority in favour of the IFI' (Interview 10), a version confirmed by a senior parliamentary official (Interview 9). Another MP added that the parliament exerted a negligible influence on the government concerning the Six and Two Pack (Interview 11). A witness from the ministry of economy and finance (MEF) confirmed the limited role of the parliament, as he remembered that there was an attitude of delegation and trust towards the government,

without strong critical voices and the debate on IFIs arose afterwards, with a delayed outbreak, in the implementation phase. (Interview 5).

In order to confirm the functional hypothesis on the side of benefits and further falsify the domestic one, the article now digs into the position of the government.

Government and negotiators

Most of the press declarations of minister Tremonti mentioned that the Italian government was committed to ensuring public debt sustainability through austerity-driven policies without making any references to the institutional changes the government intended to pursue (A106 to A133). For negotiations of the Six Pack, an official inside the permanent representation reported this experience:

I don't remember particular opposition from any member state on the role of IFIs. For sure, Italy did not oppose them. ... Italy has always had this favourable position because it lent money to Greece: at the beginning Italy was on the creditors' side and did not dislike exerting a bigger control on countries like Greece. Problems arose afterwards, with the crisis between Tremonti and President Berlusconi. (Interview 2)

An official of the MEF confirmed that there was no opposition to the introduction of an independent body (Interview 3). Another negotiator from the same ministry and a member of the Budget Service of the Senate confirmed that Italy had been mostly in favour since the beginning. Against a backdrop of a negotiation where Italy disapproved of several elements, the introduction of IFIs looked reasonable (Interviews 5 and 9).

A triangulation with an MP shows that MPs looked at the situation in the following way:

In that period, the government saw independent institutions as an emanation of the European Commission rather than as a national counterpart. We won the resistance of the government only when the Parliamentary Budget Office was designed, as its validations are authoritative, yet not binding. (Interview 11)

In the Six Pack negotiation, therefore, the Italian government was more interested in ensuring the compliance to fiscal rules by other member states (i.e. Greece) than to second the preferences of domestic actors. Such a confirmation of the functional sub-hypothesis related to benefits is consistent with one declaration from foreign affairs minister Frattini in the *Camera*:

All member states should have the possibility to supervise the management of domestic business in other states: the idea of having in place a system of general monitoring on each other is a fundamental principle, as no state can admit that [public finance] is a mere internal affair. We are in this together, and if a state showcases mismanagement of its public accounts this will have consequences on everyone. (D2)

Regarding the Two Pack, newspaper articles never reported declarations by the minister of economy and finance (A136 to A149). Negotiators in Brussels saw the discussion as less salient, and the Italian position remained constant without big clashes. The negotiating effort was focused on the number of reports that were due should a country incur an Excessive Deficit Procedure. Moreover, northern countries and Germany wanted that IFIs had the power to directly ask clarifications of governments and even sanction them. Italy managed to remove these parts from the final texts (Interview 2). Another negotiator reported that the European Commission presented an annex with IFI requirements. One of them was about who was to oversee the macroeconomic forecasts. Italy obtained that such forecasts were to be prepared not by IFIs but by Finance Ministries and then endorsed by IFIs (Interview 5). The Budget Service of the Senate noticed:

more resistance from Italy and Spain, while most of the member states were neutral, and northern member states as well as the European Commission were strongly in favour. ... In

Italy, the political discourse was focused on other topics, and when it came to discussing the Two Pack, negotiators realised that IFIs were irreversibly present in the EU negotiations. (Interview 9)

There are no traces of such discussions in the parliamentary records or the press, thus, the domestic hypothesis is again falsified. Low saliency on IFIs, apart from some technical aspects, also shows that the political cost was low, confirming H_{1,2}.

Overall, negotiations were conducted without *a priori* prejudices on the necessity of creating IFIs. Other interviews confirm the low saliency and the scarce attention from domestic actors. As an Italian negotiator reported, 'both the Six and Two Pack included more controversial issues than the creation and definition of IFIs' (Interview 3), while a Dutch said that 'IFIs were not very difficult to achieve in the Six Pack, and in Two Pack northern and southern member states had different views only about technicalities' (Interview 8). Moreover, another testimony of one of the senior Italian negotiators of the permanent representation to the EU, shows that 'all the specific proposals came from the Commission, which acted in tandem with Germany, and the Mediterranean front acted in damage control mode without taking a direct position against anything' (Interview 1). However, among these proposals, IFIs were the ones of least concern for Italy.

Domestic actors

Despite taking positions on the broader topic of fiscal policy, actors like the Bank of Italy, Confindustria, trade unions, and key national bureaucracies never mentioned IFIs in the press.

Trade unions were never heard from in the parliament on the reforms of the EMU governance. Hence, it is very unlikely that they shaped the preferences of the government. Moreover, in only four of 23 articles, Italian trade unions showed support for a cut in public spending (A151; A159; A163; A164). Confindustria called for more prudent fiscal policies several times in the press. 29 out of 72 newspaper articles contained at least one declaration from its president Marcegaglia in favour of austere fiscal policies (A34 to A105). Confindustria would have therefore been likely to welcome the introduction of an IFI, but it did not pressure the government explicitly.

Regarding ISTAT, president Giovannini was heard by the Budget Committees to discuss the role that the Greek Statistics Office played in manipulating the country's public accounts (D29). The president called for more independent and reliable national statistics offices, but never engaged in the debate on IFIs. The Comptroller General stated that he was in favour of an independent institution (D73) but his suggestion that his office could have assumed that role was not considered. The Bank of Italy discussed with more attention the issue of IFIs: Visco was in favour of all the proposals of the TFEG (D20). His hearing, however, took place in December 2010, when the key elements of the Six Pack had already been negotiated. Overall, the Bank of Italy always tried to push for a rapid implementation of the EMU governance reforms. In the press, the Governor of the Bank of Italy Draghi mentioned that Europe needed 'a strong economic governance where discipline was extended from budgetary policy to national reforms' (A2). This declaration, dated 3 March 2010, preceded even the TFEG, and suggested that the Bank of Italy had always exerted pressure on the government to introduce all the necessary changes to enhance the EMU. However, it did not include IFIs.

This review on the activity of domestic stakeholders shows that they did not exert influence on the government concerning the introduction of IFIs, thus confirming the falsification of the domestic hypothesis for the parliament.

In conclusion, findings are strongly supportive of H₁ and clearly falsify H₂. Despite an IFI not being already present in Italian legislation and the objections of parliament, negotiators judged it a reasonable change inside negotiations full of matters that Italy did not like. Moreover, Italy wanted to put in place independent institutions to exert more control over other countries, thus solving an evident problem of collective action. On the contrary, there is evidence against

H₂. All declarations by domestic stakeholders about the free-riding behaviour of other countries came after meetings in which Italy discussed its own negotiating position. Furthermore, the Italian parliament took position several times against IFIs by voting against amendments aimed at introducing an independent institution in the national legal system. Having a core institution like the parliament voting against IFIs strongly falsifies H₂. Finally, the Two Pack was the least relevant matter. Negotiators reported that the Italian position was sceptical on specific provisions, but an agreement on IFIs was simple to reach. Italy held a pragmatic position on IFIs, thus not falsifying H₁. On the contrary, H₂ finds inconsistent evidence, as domestic stakeholders, including foremost the parliament, were not involved in the negotiations and never expressed their opinion on the matter.

The Introduction of the CBBR

After the outbreak of the Eurozone crisis, a wide discussion on how to reduce public spending took place. The parliamentary *iter* of the two reforms of the budgetary procedure – Law 196/2009 and Law 39/2011 – saw discussions on a broad package of constraints which never entailed the constitutionalisation of a balanced budget rule. To test the hypotheses, in the case of CBBR, the chronology of the events is particularly important, and the relationship between parliament and government is more intertwined than in the case of IFIs, hence are analysed together. Despite the Euro Plus Pact and TSCG being regarded as very different, in terms of both legal and political commitment, they are discussed together because they were considered by many Italian political actors to be part of the same process.

Parliament and government

In February 2011, Cambursano was the first MP who made a clear statement in favour of reforms promoting financial sustainability (D40). On 22 March 2011, three days before the conclusions of the Euro Plus Pact, Azzollini said that despite Italy needing a rigorous effort to contain public spending, the Italian situation was not resolvable through a rigid bond at the constitutional level. Morando, on the other hand, implicitly stated that a constitutional amendment was desirable (D56). The day after, Cambursano, together with other 15 MPs, presented a law proposal introducing a CBBR (A.C. 4205), clearly indicating that this was due to anticipating any request from the EU (D57). This law proposal revealed just how critical the situation was on the verge of the Euro Plus Pact agreement. On 25 March 2011, the European Council agreed on the Euro Plus Pact. A few days after, minister Tremonti outlined the position of the government in front of the Budget Committee of the *Camera* and:

The old Article 81 of our Constitution did not prevent our country from producing the third highest public debt in the world. ... The symbolic value of enshrining the balanced budget principle in the Constitution should not be underestimated, to present a positive image of our country. ... We did not discuss this in the Council of ministers: we are discussing this here for the first time. (D58)

This position was crucial to understanding how the Italian government approached the negotiations of the Euro Plus Pact. The request to have in place constitutional constraints came from other countries and the Italian government accepted it. The government discussed with parliament only after the decisions were made at the EU level, making it impossible for MPs to exert influence on the process. MPs, moreover, did not have the same position, as Baretta expressed a position against the CBBR, while Cambursano, highlighted how the Euro Plus Pact pointed in the direction of his constitutional law proposal (D58). For these reasons, the domestic hypothesis is falsified also for the Euro Plus Pact.

Regarding the functional hypothesis, interviews do not provide much evidence about the Euro Plus Pact, therefore it is difficult to assess the political cost of requesting the CBBR. However, given the vagueness of the text of the conclusions of the European Council and the low importance attributed by Tremonti in front of parliament, they appear to be rather low. On the contrary, interviews help prove H_{1.1}. One of the lead Italian negotiators reports that:

Italy was not enthusiastic about the introduction of the debt rule, but it was impossible to resist due to the risks that the country was facing and the track record of the Italian public debt. Italy took constructive part in all the negotiations, notwithstanding the change of government occurred in November 2011. All the proposals were prompted by the Germans and Dutch, while Italy tried to limit them by putting other items on the table. [...] There was widespread fear in Europe – but also in Italy – that the Italian debt could have exploded and made the Euro area collapse. Italy's choices in the negotiations were due to avoid accusations of free riding and moral hazard. This strategy was adopted intuitively under President Berlusconi and minister Tremonti, while it was rationalised under President Monti. (Interview 1)

This version is confirmed by a Senator of the majority, strongly involved in the discussions:

The debate was extremely tight, mostly informal, with Tremonti and other colleagues. [...] The introduction was necessary; spreads were extremely high and there was enormous political pressure. There was someone that opposed balanced budgets, but for merely political reasons. The spectre of the Troika was there and in the Budget Committee it was clear how difficult it was to sell bonds. The tension was so high that MPs reasoned in a great spirit of unity. (Interview 11)

Such testimonies show that the negotiations of the CBBR were aimed at resolving a collective action problem, which was the fact that the failure of a single member state could have had a spillover effect across Europe, and therefore the other member states had to ensure a positive solution to the problem. The main difference with the Six Pack negotiations is that in that case Italy was willing to solve such problems in other countries, while in the Euro Plus Pact, it had to cope with domestic problems. In any case, this information proves that H_{1.1} is correct.

Between July and September 2011, six other constitutional law proposals introducing the CBBR were presented by MPs in the *Camera*. In every proposal, the Euro Plus Pact was cited as the element that triggered the discussion on the constitutional change, but the reasons to put in place a CBBR were various.

On 5 August 2011, *Il Corriere della Sera* released a classified letter by the Governor of the Bank of Italy Draghi and the President of the ECB Trichet directed to Berlusconi saying that, 'given the seriousness of the situation of the financial markets, ... it would be appropriate that Italy adopted a constitutional reform that would make budgetary rules more stringent' (2011). Ten days after, the government presented its own constitutional law proposal to the *Camera*. All proposals were discussed all together between October 2011 and April 2012 (D139 to D145).

In October 2011, the Constitutional Affairs and Budget Committees of the *Camera* heard several experts. Only two out of 16 expressed a contrary opinion to any kind of CBBR and MPs mainly reacted in a positive way to the constitutional changes. The debate focused on which way was best for constitutionalising the balanced budget rule.

On 12 November 2011, the Berlusconi Cabinet resigned, and was substituted a few days afterwards by the Monti Cabinet, supported by a much broader parliamentary coalition and committed to the realisation of unpopular reforms in order to recover from the economic crisis. The constitutional *iter* lasted from November 2011 to April 2012. A final, consensual text was approved four times by an overwhelming majority (D97; D98; D101; D104; D108), but it did not exclude disagreements. For example, a Senator from the opposition saw the CBBR as 'a forcing that would have penalised Italy in the years to come' and reported that 'many colleagues reluctantly accepted to vote in favour or deserted the plenary' (Interview 7). Again, the fact that some MPs preferred to reluctantly change their minds or not to vote rather than to vocally state their opposition is consistent with the functional hypothesis, as the CBBR was essential to meeting the EU objectives rather than to second the will of many domestic actors.

During the constitutional *iter*, between December 2011 and January 2012, EU leaders negotiated the TSCG, which adopted much more stringent conclusions as regards the CBBR than the Euro Plus Pact (European Commission 2012). During that period, parliament heard the minister for European affairs Moavero and four influential MEPs. While, in the latter hearing, CBBR was not salient (D95), in the former most of the MPs either agreed with the principles of the TSCG or stated that Italy was already complying thanks to the constitutional law under approval procedure (D94). The minister declared:

It is important for us to get rid of all doubts on our vocation to confirm all the commitments to discipline deriving from the Treaty. ... The effort of the country to introduce the balanced budget rule, which is spontaneous, demonstrates that our country is able to meet that goal autonomously. (D94)

Therefore, the government knew that the parliament was undertaking a constitutional change, which made it easy to accept the provision of the Treaty on the CBBR. The lack of implementation costs is confirmed by an interview with an official of the MEF, who said:

We were very open to the balanced budget principle in the Constitution, and the first constitutional law proposal in Italy came before the TSCG, so the country was already complying. The most relevant part for us was that there were no add-ons to the Six Pack in terms of debt rules and MTOs. (Interview 5)

H_{1.2} is also confirmed by the ratification procedure of the TSCG by the Italian parliament, which started immediately after the approval of the constitutional amendment. This time, despite some vocal opposition, MPs were aware that Italy was already complying with the provision on the CBBR, hence, it was easy to find support for the TSCG (D124; D125; D129; D134). For all these reasons, H_{1.2} is strongly confirmed for all the negotiations after the Euro Plus Pact.

Regarding collective action problems, H_{1.1} is confirmed, as it appears in an interview to another negotiator:

The TSCG can be understood in the context of a general discussion which included the ESM, for which the CBBR was a necessary condition. The position of Italy was due to the critical situation which required a risk-sharing instrument like the ESM. In the end, negotiators approved the ESM, but some countries, driven by their domestic political debate, required risk-reduction mechanisms [the CBBR] to be in place. (Interview 2)

Such a position is consistent with both the testimonies of policymakers (Buti 2020), as well as the findings of academics (Moschella 2017). In this case, since member states required, in order to proceed with the creation of the ESM, solving a clear collective action problem first, H_{1.1} is confirmed. In conclusion, low implementation costs together with the necessity to resolve collective action problems strongly confirm the functional hypothesis.

Domestic actors

To discard the domestic hypothesis once and for all, the position of domestic actors is reviewed. Twice the Bank of Italy expressed its position on debt rules. In a 2010 hearing, Visco said:

The introduction of a numerical fiscal rule is no more burdening for our country than the objective of a balanced budget that we already have. ... A debt rule would also reassure the investors that public debt will be effectively reduced in the future. (D20)

The Bank of Italy thus reasoned pragmatically in terms of costs and benefits for the country. It was therefore likely to have welcomed the constitutional provision, but there is no evidence that it pushed for it.

Another clear statement was inside the letter of 5 August; however, the letter comes after both the Euro Plus Pact and the constitutional proposals of some MPs, therefore it could not have influenced the negotiations of the Euro Plus Pact. Moreover, it was not clear whether Draghi wrote this letter acting as Governor of the Bank of Italy or incoming President of the ECB.

Newspaper articles showed that the Bank of Italy was fully supportive of the reduction of public debt in Italy. Between 2010 and the Euro Plus Pact, Governor Draghi released 12 interviews or statements to *Il Sole 24 Ore* of which nine stated that the government should reduce the debt without conditions and five stated that debt reduction had to be compensated with more growth. The push for risk reduction was therefore strong, but Draghi never made clear that a constitutional reform was necessary (A1 to A12).

Between 2010 and the Euro Plus Pact, Confindustria's president Marcegaglia released 28 declarations. In 21 she outlined the necessity for reducing public spending, but without calling for changing the Constitution; in 15 the importance of combining growth and austerity (A34 to A61). Trade unions made nine declarations, in which there were four references to cuts. However, they related mostly to the wages of politicians and the costs of public administration and there was no reference to the CBBR (A150 to A158).

All the declarations from domestic actors other than MPs that could have influenced the negotiations on the CBBR do not specifically refer to it. Such an observation further falsifies the domestic hypothesis.

CONCLUSIONS

This article investigated negotiations at the European Union level underlying the introduction of an Independent Fiscal Institution (IFI) and Constitutional Balanced Budget Rule (CBBR) in Italy between 2010 and 2013. By looking at parliamentary documents, press releases and interviews, the article explained the main reasons motivating the institutional choices of Italian decision-makers and negotiators. Two contrasting hypotheses were tested: a functional hypothesis borrowed from the legalisation theory – an international relations framework seldom used for EU integration matters but very suitable in this case – and a classic domestic hypothesis taken from Liberal Intergovernmentalism (LI). The former explains the outcome as a choice that balances functional benefits of institutions with their costs as perceived by decision-makers, while the latter as explains the outcome the maximisation of the institutional preferences of domestic actors. Overall, data points to the confirmation of the functional hypothesis and to the falsification of the domestic one. Regarding the introduction of the IFI, in the context of the Six Pack negotiations, Italian negotiators saw IFIs as a useful, easily implementable instrument increasing financial stability in other EU member states. On the contrary, domestic actors were either indifferent or against the introduction of an IFI. The strengthening of IFIs through the Two pack was not salient domestically, and negotiations regarded only technicalities. Regarding the introduction of the CBBR, the domestic debate was triggered by external factors, mainly the economic situation and pressures from other EU member states, hence decision-makers pledged to introduce a constitutional rule reluctantly. When it came to negotiating the Treaty on Stability, Coordination and Governance, which required member states to have a CBBR in place, negotiators were well aware that Italy was already implementing it, therefore they welcomed the proposal as it was basically costless. The choice for a case study based on a single country allowed for an immersive analysis providing strong evidence in favour or against the hypotheses, however, the breadth of the analysis is narrow. For this reason, more research needs to be conducted on other cases, to understand whether findings are consistent or inconsistent in other EU member states.

In any case, such conclusions have several implications for the academic debate on the EU post-crisis evolution. First, despite its main expectation being falsified, LI still proved a viable framework for analysing supranational negotiations affecting domestic instead of EU institutions. Rather than ruling out LI, this article calls for more case studies on this and similar

matters and for further updating the theoretical framework to include the most theoretically challenging outcomes of EMU governance reforms.

Second, legalisation theory fits very well the case under analysis and its expectations were confirmed. On the contrary, similar functionalist explanations from EU integration theories could not be used, as the dependent variable – the creation of new institutions and rules at the national level – does not constitute a case of EU integration strictly speaking. This consideration raises two rather important questions: Are functionalist EU integration theories capable of understanding all the dynamics of the EU institutional evolution? Are more general and flexible international relations frameworks better?

Third, this article shows the importance of digging into national parliamentary records to understand the reasons for the choices within EU negotiations. Against the backdrop of an increasingly prominent role of national parliaments in EU decision-making (Revesz 2021; Heffttler, Neuhold, Rozenberg and Smith 2015), relying on this kind of source has become more and more important in the study of EU politics.

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APPENDIX**Newspaper Articles**

Ref.	Date (yyyy.mm.dd)	Source	Interviewee	# codes
A1	2010.02.14	Il Sole 24 Ore	Mario Draghi	1
A2	2010.03.04	Il Sole 24 Ore	Mario Draghi	0
A3	2010.03.18	Il Sole 24 Ore	Mario Draghi	3
A4	2010.03.20	Il Sole 24 Ore	Mario Draghi	2
A5	2010.05.12	Il Sole 24 Ore	Mario Draghi	1
A6	2010.05.31	Il Sole 24 Ore	Mario Draghi	1
A7	2010.06.01	Il Sole 24 Ore	Mario Draghi	4
A8	2010.10.29	Il Sole 24 Ore	Mario Draghi	1
A9	2010.12.06	Il Sole 24 Ore	Mario Draghi	1
A10	2010.12.07	Il Sole 24 Ore	Mario Draghi	1
A11	2011.02.22	Il Sole 24 Ore	Mario Draghi	1
A12	2011.03.22	Il Sole 24 Ore	Mario Draghi	2
A13	2011.04.22	Il Sole 24 Ore	Mario Draghi	1
A14	2011.05.26	Il Sole 24 Ore	Mario Draghi	1
A15	2011.07.09	Il Sole 24 Ore	Mario Draghi	1
A16	2011.07.14	Il Sole 24 Ore	Mario Draghi	1
A17	2011.09.09	Il Sole 24 Ore	Mario Draghi	2
A18	2011.10.23	Il Sole 24 Ore	Ignazio Visco	0
A19	2011.10.26	Il Sole 24 Ore	Ignazio Visco	1
A20	2011.11.01	Il Sole 24 Ore	Ignazio Visco	2
A21	2011.11.03	Il Sole 24 Ore	Ignazio Visco	1
A22	2011.11.12	Il Sole 24 Ore	Ignazio Visco	0
A23	2011.11.26	Il Sole 24 Ore	Ignazio Visco	1
A24	2012.02.26	Il Sole 24 Ore	Ignazio Visco	1
A25	2012.04.22	Il Sole 24 Ore	Ignazio Visco	0
A26	2012.04.27	Il Sole 24 Ore	Ignazio Visco	0
A27	2012.06.20	Il Sole 24 Ore	Ignazio Visco	1
A28	2012.07.12	Il Sole 24 Ore	Ignazio Visco	2
A29	2012.08.04	Il Sole 24 Ore	Ignazio Visco	1
A30	2012.09.16	Il Sole 24 Ore	Ignazio Visco	3
A31	2012.11.15	Il Sole 24 Ore	Ignazio Visco	1
A32	2013.01.19	Il Sole 24 Ore	Ignazio Visco	1
A33	2013.04.21	Il Sole 24 Ore	Ignazio Visco	1
A34	2010.01.19	Il Sole 24 Ore	Emma Marcegaglia	2
A35	2010.02.24	Il Sole 24 Ore	Emma Marcegaglia	3
A36	2010.03.03	Il Sole 24 Ore	Emma Marcegaglia	3
A37	2010.03.11	Il Sole 24 Ore	Emma Marcegaglia	2
A38	2010.04.11	Il Sole 24 Ore	Emma Marcegaglia	3
A39	2010.05.22	Il Sole 24 Ore	Emma Marcegaglia	1
A40	2010.05.28	Il Sole 24 Ore	Emma Marcegaglia	0
A41	2010.06.01	Il Sole 24 Ore	Emma Marcegaglia	4

Ref.	Date (yyyy.mm.dd)	Source	Interviewee	# codes
A42	2010.06.08	Il Sole 24 Ore	Emma Marcegaglia	1
A43	2010.06.12	Il Sole 24 Ore	Emma Marcegaglia	3
A44	2010.06.13	Il Sole 24 Ore	Emma Marcegaglia	1
A45	2010.06.22	Il Sole 24 Ore	Emma Marcegaglia	3
A46	2010.06.22 (2)	Il Sole 24 Ore	Emma Marcegaglia	2
A47	2010.06.23	Il Sole 24 Ore	Emma Marcegaglia	3
A48	2010.06.24	Il Sole 24 Ore	Emma Marcegaglia	2
A49	2010.08.14	Il Sole 24 Ore	Emma Marcegaglia	0
A50	2010.09.12	Il Sole 24 Ore	Emma Marcegaglia	0
A51	2010.10.06	Il Sole 24 Ore	Emma Marcegaglia	0
A52	2010.10.09	Il Sole 24 Ore	Emma Marcegaglia	1
A53	2010.10.13	Il Sole 24 Ore	Emma Marcegaglia	1
A54	2010.10.21	Il Sole 24 Ore	Emma Marcegaglia	0
A55	2010.11.20	Il Sole 24 Ore	Emma Marcegaglia	0
A56	2010.11.26	Il Sole 24 Ore	Emma Marcegaglia	2
A57	2010.12.08	Il Sole 24 Ore	Emma Marcegaglia	1
A58	2010.12.21	Il Sole 24 Ore	Emma Marcegaglia	2
A59	2011.01.25	Il Sole 24 Ore	Emma Marcegaglia	0
A60	2011.01.27	Il Sole 24 Ore	Emma Marcegaglia	0
A61	2011.03.15	Il Sole 24 Ore	Emma Marcegaglia	3
A62	2011.04.01	Il Sole 24 Ore	Emma Marcegaglia	1
A63	2011.04.12	Il Sole 24 Ore	Emma Marcegaglia	0
A64	2011.05.05	Il Sole 24 Ore	Emma Marcegaglia	1
A65	2011.05.31	Il Sole 24 Ore	Emma Marcegaglia	1
A66	2011.06.01	Il Sole 24 Ore	Emma Marcegaglia	1
A67	2011.06.22	Il Sole 24 Ore	Emma Marcegaglia	1
A68	2011.06.28	Il Sole 24 Ore	Emma Marcegaglia	2
A69	2011.07.05	Il Sole 24 Ore	Emma Marcegaglia	1
A70	2011.07.09	Il Sole 24 Ore	Emma Marcegaglia	2
A71	2011.07.12	Il Sole 24 Ore	Emma Marcegaglia	1
A72	2011.07.19	Il Sole 24 Ore	Emma Marcegaglia	3
A73	2011.08.11	Il Sole 24 Ore	Emma Marcegaglia	2
A74	2011.08.12	Il Sole 24 Ore	Emma Marcegaglia	1
A75	2011.08.24	Il Sole 24 Ore	Emma Marcegaglia	2
A76	2011.10.01	Il Sole 24 Ore	Emma Marcegaglia	0
A77	2011.10.21	Il Sole 24 Ore	Emma Marcegaglia	1
A78	2011.10.23	Il Sole 24 Ore	Emma Marcegaglia	1
A79	2011.10.30	Il Sole 24 Ore	Emma Marcegaglia	2
A80	2011.11.03	Il Sole 24 Ore	Emma Marcegaglia	2
A81	2011.11.10	Il Sole 24 Ore	Emma Marcegaglia	1
A82	2011.11.16	Il Sole 24 Ore	Emma Marcegaglia	0
A83	2011.12.03	Il Sole 24 Ore	Emma Marcegaglia	2
A84	2011.12.05	Il Sole 24 Ore	Emma Marcegaglia	3
A85	2011.12.06	Il Sole 24 Ore	Emma Marcegaglia	3

Ref.	Date (yyyy.mm.dd)	Source	Interviewee	# codes
A86	2011.12.16	Il Sole 24 Ore	Emma Marcegaglia	2
A87	2012.01.14	Il Sole 24 Ore	Emma Marcegaglia	4
A88	2012.01.18	Il Sole 24 Ore	Emma Marcegaglia	2
A89	2012.01.20	Il Sole 24 Ore	Emma Marcegaglia	2
A90	2012.01.27	Il Sole 24 Ore	Emma Marcegaglia	1
A91	2012.03.18	Il Sole 24 Ore	Emma Marcegaglia	0
A92	2012.04.01	Il Sole 24 Ore	Emma Marcegaglia	1
A93	2012.04.04	Il Sole 24 Ore	Emma Marcegaglia	2
A94	2012.04.14	Il Sole 24 Ore	Emma Marcegaglia	2
A95	2012.05.03	Il Sole 24 Ore	Emma Marcegaglia	2
A96	2012.05.04	Il Sole 24 Ore	Emma Marcegaglia	2
A97	2012.05.08	Il Sole 24 Ore	Emma Marcegaglia	1
A98	2012.05.10	Il Sole 24 Ore	Emma Marcegaglia	5
A99	2012.05.11	Il Sole 24 Ore	Emma Marcegaglia	2
A100	2012.05.15	Il Sole 24 Ore	Emma Marcegaglia	2
A101	2012.05.16	Il Sole 24 Ore	Emma Marcegaglia	2
A102	2012.06.07	Il Sole 24 Ore	Emma Marcegaglia	2
A103	2012.06.16	Il Sole 24 Ore	Emma Marcegaglia	2
A104	2012.07.05	Il Sole 24 Ore	Emma Marcegaglia	1
A105	2012.10.18	Il Sole 24 Ore	Emma Marcegaglia	2
A106	2010.02.24	Il Sole 24 Ore	Giulio Tremonti	2
A107	2010.03.04	Il Sole 24 Ore	Giulio Tremonti	1
A108	2010.03.31	Il Sole 24 Ore	Giulio Tremonti	1
A109	2010.04.09	Il Sole 24 Ore	Giulio Tremonti	1
A110	2010.05.07	Il Sole 24 Ore	Giulio Tremonti	3
A111	2010.05.12	Il Sole 24 Ore	Giulio Tremonti	2
A112	2010.05.19	Il Sole 24 Ore	Giulio Tremonti	1
A113	2010.09.04	Il Sole 24 Ore	Giulio Tremonti	1
A114	2010.09.11	Il Sole 24 Ore	Giulio Tremonti	3
A115	2010.09.30	Il Sole 24 Ore	Giulio Tremonti	1
A116	2010.10.06	Il Sole 24 Ore	Giulio Tremonti	2
A117	2010.10.15	Il Sole 24 Ore	Giulio Tremonti	1
A118	2010.10.19	Il Sole 24 Ore	Giulio Tremonti	2
A119	2010.11.18	Il Sole 24 Ore	Giulio Tremonti	5
A120	2010.12.11	Il Sole 24 Ore	Giulio Tremonti	3
A121	2010.12.30	Il Sole 24 Ore	Giulio Tremonti	1
A122	2011.01.19	Il Sole 24 Ore	Giulio Tremonti	1
A123	2011.02.16	Il Sole 24 Ore	Giulio Tremonti	2
A124	2011.03.30	Il Sole 24 Ore	Giulio Tremonti	3
A125	2011.06.01	Il Sole 24 Ore	Giulio Tremonti	0
A126	2011.06.25	Il Sole 24 Ore	Giulio Tremonti	0
A127	2011.06.30	Il Sole 24 Ore	Giulio Tremonti	1
A128	2011.07.09	Il Sole 24 Ore	Giulio Tremonti	1
A129	2011.07.15	Il Sole 24 Ore	Giulio Tremonti	0

Ref.	Date (yyyy.mm.dd)	Source	Interviewee	# codes
A130	2011.08.02	Il Sole 24 Ore	Giulio Tremonti	1
A131	2011.08.11	Il Sole 24 Ore	Giulio Tremonti	0
A132	2011.08.28	Il Sole 24 Ore	Giulio Tremonti	1
A133	2011.09.18	Il Sole 24 Ore	Giulio Tremonti	1
A134	2011.11.12	Il Sole 24 Ore	Mario Monti	0
A135	2011.11.18	Il Sole 24 Ore	Mario Monti	2
A136	2012.01.14	Il Sole 24 Ore	Mario Monti	1
A137	2012.02.09	Il Sole 24 Ore	Mario Monti	0
A138	2012.02.16	Il Sole 24 Ore	Mario Monti	3
A139	2012.04.27	Il Sole 24 Ore	Mario Monti	1
A140	2012.04.28	Il Sole 24 Ore	Mario Monti	1
A141	2012.05.15	Il Sole 24 Ore	Mario Monti	2
A142	2012.05.16	Il Sole 24 Ore	Mario Monti	1
A143	2012.06.01	Il Sole 24 Ore	Mario Monti	3
A144	2012.06.08	Il Sole 24 Ore	Mario Monti	1
A145	2012.06.13	Il Sole 24 Ore	Mario Monti	1
A146	2012.07.10	Il Sole 24 Ore	Mario Monti	2
A147	2012.08.25	Il Sole 24 Ore	Vittorio Grilli	1
A148	2012.10.12	Il Sole 24 Ore	Vittorio Grilli	1
A149	2012.11.06	Il Sole 24 Ore	Vittorio Grilli	2
A150	2010.05.19	Il Sole 24 Ore	Trade Unions	1
A151	2010.05.25	Il Sole 24 Ore	Trade Unions	3
A152	2010.05.28	Il Sole 24 Ore	Trade Unions	1
A153	2010.06.11	Il Sole 24 Ore	Trade Unions	1
A154	2010.08.22	Il Sole 24 Ore	Trade Unions	3
A155	2010.09.26	Il Sole 24 Ore	Trade Unions	0
A156	2010.11.20	Il Sole 24 Ore	Trade Unions	0
A157	2011.03.16	Il Sole 24 Ore	Trade Unions	0
A158	2011.03.19	Il Sole 24 Ore	Trade Unions	1
A159	2011.07.12	Il Sole 24 Ore	Trade Unions	4
A160	2011.08.26	Il Sole 24 Ore	Trade Unions	2
A161	2011.10.25	Il Sole 24 Ore	Trade Unions	2
A162	2011.11.11	Il Sole 24 Ore	Trade Unions	2
A163	2011.11.15	Il Sole 24 Ore	Trade Unions	4
A164	2011.11.16	Il Sole 24 Ore	Trade Unions	4
A165	2011.12.08	Il Sole 24 Ore	Trade Unions	1
A166	2012.01.08	Il Sole 24 Ore	Trade Unions	0
A167	2012.01.25	Il Sole 24 Ore	Trade Unions	1
A168	2012.02.10	Il Sole 24 Ore	Trade Unions	1
A169	2012.02.15	Il Sole 24 Ore	Trade Unions	1
A170	2012.06.17	Il Sole 24 Ore	Trade Unions	0
A171	2012.08.24	Il Sole 24 Ore	Trade Unions	1
A172	2012.10.21	Il Sole 24 Ore	Trade Unions	1

PARLIAMENTARY RECORDS

Ref.	Date (yyyy.mm.dd)	Branch	Venue*	Type	# codes
D1	2010.06.30	House	V,XIV Committee	Summary	1
D2	2010.07.07	House	V,XIV Committee	Verbatim	11
D3	2010.07.15	House	V,XIV Committee	Verbatim	12
D4	2010.07.27	House	V,XIV Committee	Summary	2
D5	2010.07.30	House	V,XIV Committee	Summary	1
D6	2010.10.26	Senate	3 Committee	Summary	2
D7	2010.10.26	Senate	5 Committee	Summary	4
D8	2010.10.26	Senate	5 Committee	Summary	1
D9	2010.10.27	Senate	3 Committee	Summary	3
D10	2010.10.27	Senate	5 Committee	Summary	1
D11	2010.10.27	Senate	5 Committee	Summary	0
D12	2010.10.27	Senate	Plenary	Verbatim	4
D13	2010.10.28	Senate	Plenary	Verbatim	5
D14	2010.11.11	Senate	14 Committee	Summary	1
D15	2010.11.16	Senate	14 Committee	Summary	0
D16	2010.12.01	House	V,XIV Committee	Verbatim	0
D17	2010.12.02	Both	5,V Committee	Verbatim	8
D18	2010.12.09	House	V,XIV Committee	Summary	12
D19	2010.12.10	Both	3,5,14,III,V,XIV Committee	Verbatim	12
D20	2010.12.10	Both	5,14,V,XIV Committee	Verbatim	11
D21	2010.12.10	House	V,XIV Committee	Summary	2
D22	2010.12.13	Senate	5 Committee	Summary	1
D23	2010.12.14	Senate	5 Committee	Summary	2
D24	2011.01.12	House	V Committee	Summary	1
D25	2011.01.18	Both	5,V Committee	Verbatim	4
D26	2011.01.19	Both	5,V Committee	Verbatim	14
D27	2011.01.19	Both	5,V Committee	Verbatim	7
D28	2011.01.20	Both	5,V Committee	Verbatim	1
D29	2011.01.20	Both	5,V Committee	Verbatim	1
D30	2011.01.25	House	V Committee	Summary	1
D31	2011.01.26	House	V Committee	Summary	1
D32	2011.02.01	House	V Committee	Summary	1
D33	2011.02.01	House	VI Committee	Summary	1
D34	2011.02.01	House	XIV Committee	Summary	1
D35	2011.02.02	House	V Committee	Summary	1
D36	2011.02.02	House	VI Committee	Summary	1
D37	2011.02.02	House	XIV Committee	Summary	2
D38	2011.02.03	House	I Committee	Summary	0
D39	2011.02.03	House	V Committee	Summary	1
D40	2011.02.07	House	Plenary	Verbatim	9
D41	2011.02.09	House	Plenary	Verbatim	6
D42	2011.02.09	House	I Committee	Summary	1

Ref.	Date (yyyy.mm.dd)	Branch	Venue*	Type	# codes
D43	2011.02.22	Senate	5 Committee	Summary	1
D44	2011.02.23	Senate	5 Committee	Summary	0
D45	2011.03.02	Senate	5 Committee	Summary	0
D46	2011.03.03	Senate	5 Committee	Summary	1
D47	2011.03.09	Senate	5 Committee	Summary	3
D48	2011.03.10	Senate	5 Committee	Summary	3
D49	2011.03.15	Senate	1 Committee	Summary	0
D50	2011.03.15	Senate	14 Committee	Summary	0
D51	2011.03.15	Senate	5 Committee	Summary	4
D52	2011.03.16	Senate	Plenary	Verbatim	2
D53	2011.03.16	Senate	Plenary	Verbatim	1
D54	2011.03.22	Senate	1 Committee	Summary	0
D55	2011.03.22	Senate	5 Committee	Summary	0
D56	2011.03.22	Senate	Plenary	Verbatim	29
D57	2011.03.23	Senate	Plenary	Verbatim	10
D58	2011.03.29	House	V Committee	Verbatim	1
D59	2011.03.29	House	V Committee	Summary	1
D60	2011.03.30	House	V Committee	Summary	1
D61	2011.03.30	House	VI Committee	Summary	1
D62	2011.04.04	House	Plenary	Verbatim	2
D63	2011.04.05	House	I Committee	Summary	0
D64	2011.04.05	House	V Committee	Summary	0
D65	2011.04.06	House	Plenary	Verbatim	3
D66	2011.07.15	House	Plenary	Verbatim	0
D67	2011.08.11	Both	1,I,5,V Committee	Verbatim	21
D68	2011.10.05	House	I,V Committee	Summary	3
D69	2011.10.17	House	I,V Committee	Verbatim	18
D70	2011.10.18	House	I,V Committee	Verbatim	3
D71	2011.10.24	House	I,V Committee	Verbatim	20
D72	2011.10.25	House	I,V Committee	Verbatim	3
D73	2011.10.26	House	I,V Committee	Verbatim	4
D74	2011.11.02	House	I,V Committee	Summary	17
D75	2011.11.03	House	I,V Committee	Summary	1
D76	2011.11.08	House	I,V Committee	Summary	0
D77	2011.11.09	House	I,V Committee	Summary	3
D78	2011.11.10	House	I,V Committee	Summary	9
D79	2011.11.10	House	VI Committee	Summary	2
D80	2011.11.23	House	Plenary	Verbatim	31
D81	2011.11.29	House	Plenary	Verbatim	25
D82	2011.11.29	House	I,V Committee	Summary	0
D83	2011.11.30	House	Plenary	Verbatim	15
D84	2011.11.30	House	I,V Committee	Summary	0
D85	2011.12.07	Senate	1,5 Committee	Summary	3
D86	2011.12.12	Senate	1,5 Committee	Summary	5

Ref.	Date (yyyy.mm.dd)	Branch	Venue*	Type	# codes
D87	2011.12.13	Senate	1,5 Committee	Summary	12
D88	2011.12.13	Senate	1,5 Committee	Summary	1
D89	2011.12.13	Senate	6 Committee	Summary	8
D90	2011.12.13	Senate	6 Committee	Summary	12
D91	2011.12.14	Senate	1,5 Committee	Summary	4
D92	2011.12.14	Senate	Plenary	Verbatim	12
D93	2011.12.15	Senate	Plenary	Verbatim	28
D94	2012.01.19	Both	3,III,5,V,14,XIV Committee	Verbatim	18
D95	2012.01.24	Both	3,III,14,XIV Committee	Verbatim	4
D96	2012.02.21	House	I,V Committee	Summary	3
D97	2012.03.05	House	Plenary	Verbatim	4
D98	2012.03.06	House	Plenary	Verbatim	13
D99	2012.03.14	Senate	1,5 Committee	Summary	1
D100	2012.03.20	Senate	1,5 Committee	Summary	1
D101	2012.03.29	Senate	Plenary	Verbatim	1
D102	2012.04.03	Senate	3 Committee	Summary	3
D103	2012.04.11	Senate	14 Committee	Summary	1
D104	2012.04.11	Senate	Plenary	Verbatim	12
D105	2012.04.12	Senate	5 Committee	Summary	1
D106	2012.04.17	Senate	3 Committee	Summary	2
D107	2012.04.17	Senate	5 Committee	Summary	0
D108	2012.04.17	Senate	Plenary	Verbatim	13
D109	2012.04.18	Senate	14 Committee	Summary	2
D110	2012.04.18	Senate	3 Committee	Summary	2
D111	2012.05.31	Senate	3 Committee	Summary	2
D112	2012.06.05	Senate	3 Committee	Summary	2
D113	2012.06.13	Senate	14 Committee	Summary	2
D114	2012.06.19	Senate	1 Committee	Summary	3
D115	2012.06.19	Senate	3 Committee	Summary	0
D116	2012.06.19	Senate	6 Committee	Summary	0
D117	2012.06.20	Senate	1 Committee	Summary	0
D118	2012.06.20	Senate	14 Committee	Summary	2
D119	2012.06.20	Senate	3 Committee	Summary	0
D120	2012.06.20	Senate	5 Committee	Summary	1
D121	2012.06.20	Senate	6 Committee	Summary	1
D122	2012.06.21	Senate	3 Committee	Summary	0
D123	2012.06.21	Senate	6 Committee	Summary	0
D124	2012.07.11	Senate	Plenary	Verbatim	6
D125	2012.07.12	Senate	Plenary	Verbatim	21
D126	2012.07.17	House	I Committee	Summary	1
D127	2012.07.17	House	III Committee	Summary	5
D128	2012.07.17	House	XIV Committee	Summary	2
D129	2012.07.18	House	Plenary	Verbatim	6
D130	2012.07.18	House	I Committee	Summary	0

Ref.	Date (yyyy.mm.dd)	Branch	Venue*	Type	# codes
D131	2012.07.18	House	III Committee	Summary	18
D132	2012.07.18	House	V Committee	Summary	10
D133	2012.07.18	House	XIV Committee	Summary	9
D134	2012.07.19	House	Plenary	Verbatim	31
D135	2012.07.19	House	V Committee	Summary	10
D136	2012.09.26	Senate	14 Committee	Summary	1
D137	2010.12.01	House	3921 Giorgetti et al.	-	1
D138	2011.03.23	House	4205 Cambursano et al.	-	5
D139	2011.07.19	House	4525 Marinello et al.	-	2
D140	2011.07.19	House	4526 Beltrandi et al.	-	1
D141	2011.08.09	House	4594 Merloni et al.	-	2
D142	2011.08.11	House	4596 Lanzillotta et al.	-	3
D143	2011.09.07	House	4607 Martino et al.	-	1
D144	2011.09.15	House	4620 Government	-	3
D145	2011.09.27	House	4646 Bersani et al.	-	2

* Roman numbers indicate House Committees, while Arabic numbers Senate Committees.

INTERVIEWS

The interviews were pseudonymised due to research design reasons and under request of the interviewees. This summary provides basic information on the interviews: the position that the interviewee had in 2010-13, where and when the interview was conducted, and a basic ranking of the interviews.

- Interview 1 - Senior Italian negotiator, 23 Sept. 2019, Rome - IT, 3
- Interview 2 - Official at the Italian Permanent Representation to the EU, 13 Jan. 2020, Pavia - IT, 3
- Interview 3 - Official at the Italian Ministry of Economy and Finance, 24 Feb. 2020, Oxford - UK, 3
- Interview 4 - Expert on EU IFIs, 3 Mar. 2020, Oxford - UK, 1
- Interview 5 - Official at the Italian Ministry of Economy and Finance, 18 Mar. 2020, Pavia - IT, 3
- Interview 6 - Official at the Dutch CPB, 19 Mar. 2020, Pavia - IT, 2
- Interview 7 - Senator from the opposition, 2 Apr. 2020, Pavia - IT, 1
- Interview 8 - Official at the Dutch Permanent Representation to the EU, 7 Apr. 2020, Pavia - IT, 3
- Interview 9 - Official at one of the Budget Services of the Italian Parliament, 9 Apr. 2020, Pavia - IT, 3
- Interview 10 - Senator from the opposition, 15 Apr. 2020, Pavia - IT, 3
- Interview 11 - Senator from the majority, 17 Apr. 2020, Pavia - IT, 2
- Interview 12 - Italian Minister, 29 Apr. 2020, Pavia - IT, 2

Ranking code: [1] = The interviewee did not play a direct role; [2] = The interviewee had a direct role but could not recall some of the relevant details; [3] = The interviewee had a direct role and could recall most of the details.

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Research Article

The Relationships Between Europarties and European Political Groups: Changing Formal and Informal Rules and the Spitzenkandidatur

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Abstract

The condition of EU democracy is hotly debated and the European Parliament's political groups and Europarties play an important role in continuing power struggles between European Union institutions. To harness the increased power of both the European Parliament and European citizens, the formal and informal relationships between the political groups and Europarties matter, with the Spitzenkandidatur process as a crucial aspect. Using a dataset of 135 semi-structured interviews, this article looks beneath the formal rules that structure European Parliament's political groups and Europarties. Exploring how MEPs construct these relationships, it discusses leadership, institutionalisation and stances toward European integration as core elements of the relationship between Europarties and political groups in the European Parliament.

Keywords

European Parliament; Europarties; Political groups; Institutionalization; Informal politics

Debates on the current state of democracy in the European Union (EU) have been searing in recent times with the ongoing Article-7-procedures against Hungary and Poland or the Conference on the Future of Europe as important examples. Parties are considered essential for the functioning of democracy, and 'partyiness' was a key aspect of European integration (Johansson and Raunio 2019). Yet, in the European Parliament (EP), the role and function of political parties appears more complicated, and Europarties, including their political leaders, remain still relatively unknown (Kelemen 2020; Johansson and Raunio 2019; Gattermann and de Vreese 2022; 2020), even amongst their national member party activists (Johansson and Raunio 2022).

Thus, deciphering the black box of Europarties and political groups as alliances of national party delegations in the EP (hereafter EPGs) and how their connections play out in supranational governance provides important insights into the functioning of supranational party politics. In this article, we examine the formal and informal aspects of Europarty-EPG pairings, MEPs' views on Europarties and the implications of the Spitzenkandidatur process. Our data comprises 135 semi-structured interviews conducted in the EP with MEPs and EP staff during the eighth and ninth legislatures and documents from the Europarties and the political groups such as party manifestos, political group statutes and political statements.

Usually, in national parliaments, parties running in elections will match one-to-one the parliamentary group they constitute if elected. Instead, political group formation is not formally prescribed by Europarties, but relies on the EP Rules of Procedure and entails multiple layers often leading to new or considerably changed political groups (Bressanelli 2014; Ahrens and Kantola 2022). Several political groups are connected with more than one Europarty or have members not belonging to a Europarty (Gómez-Reino 2018; Ahrens and Kantola 2022). Thus, the EP lacks a party-based government as such, and Europarties are less unitary in their formal structures with much weaker parties' influence on policy outcomes (Crum 2022; Almeida 2012). The relationship of the two then raises further questions, underpinned by the assumption that political group status as democratic actors is contested (Kantola and Miller 2021).

With increased powers of the EP, its EPGs and thus potentially also Europarties received more influence at the European level, which raises questions on their relationships. Despite extant research on EPGs (Kreppel 2002; Hix, Noury and Roland 2007; Ahrens, Elomäki and Kantola 2022), the constant formal and informal interactions between Europarties and political groups remain still under-researched (Johansson and Raunio 2019; Calossi and Cicchi 2019). Johansson and Raunio (2022) note 'Europarties and EP political groups are officially independent of each other, but it is nonetheless more realistic to view them as part of the same Europarty organisation', whilst Jansen (1998: 170) noted the 'built in friction' between the Europarty and the EPG. Consequently, the relationship between Europarties and EPGs and the representation of party-based governments in the other EU institutions is less straightforward and creates questions regarding supranational democracy (Ripoll Servent 2018; Brack 2018).

We first theorise the relationship between Europarties and EPGs as one of informal governance in party politics, micropolitics and supranational democratic practices. Then, we sketch out the formal relationship between the two and how it evolved over time, including aspects like representation, resources and self-regulatory instruments. Afterwards, our empirical analysis engages with Europarty and EPG leadership, the level of institutionalisation of the Europarty and attitudes to European integration before concluding with an outlook on future research agendas.

THEORISING EUROPEAN PARTY POLITICS, INFORMAL GOVERNANCE AND MICRO-POLITICS

Extant research has engaged with how supranational party politics developed (Switek 2016, Raunio 2021; Hix and Lord 1997; Bressanelli 2014; Bardi 1994;), followed by a focus on political groups (Kreppel 2002; Hix, Noury and Roland 2007; Ahrens, Elomäki and Kantola 2022). Lately, the cooperation of populist and right-wing parties in political groups received increasing scholarly attention (McDonnell and Werner 2019; Gómez-Reino 2018; Brack 2018), including constitutionalising Europarties in light of EU regulations (Norman and Wolfs 2021; Morijn 2019). Parties and political groups are thus key elements of a parliamentary party-based EU democracy (Westlake 2019; Johansson and Raunio 2019), yet, with effects of their organisational incongruence not fully explored.

Electoral successes and failures of (Euro-)parties and voter-party congruence in the EP are well researched (Schmitt and Thomassen 1999; Mattila and Raunio 2006). Europarty and political group positions towards European integration vary (Wiesner 2019; Almeida 2012), structured broadly along 'the left/right economic cleavage and the GAL/TAN (Green-Alternative-Libertarian versus Traditional-Authoritarian-Nationalist)' (Brack 2018: 56; 83). Political groups use different measures to ensure political group cohesion (McElroy and Benoit 2012; 2010; Hix, Noury and Roland 2007), providing large Europarties with several inroads in considerably influencing policymaking given their connections with national heads of government, EPGs and Commission portfolios (Johansson and Raunio 2022). Finally, the 2014-invented Spitzenkandidatur puts Europarty-EPG pairs again centre stage in steering the fate of the EU, and thus the future of supranational democracy (Johansson and Raunio 2022; Hertner 2019; Dunphy and March 2018).

As the only directly elected EU body, the EP and its political groups rooted in Europarties are the cornerstone of supranational democracy and legitimacy shortcomings could challenge the democratic setup. With separate formal rules for Europarties and EPGs, their undeniably strong connections remain unregulated and hence their exact relationships pose an important research gap in EU governance and democracy studies. In this article, we posit that exploring interactions and relationships between Europarties and EPGs requires going beyond the formal rules and interrogating 'informal institutions as socially shared rules, usually unwritten, that are created, communicated and enforced outside the officially sanctioned channel' (Helmke and Levitsky 2004: 727).

The concept of informal governance allows us to engage with the coexistence and reciprocal influence of formal and informal arrangements in politics (Christiansen and Neuhold 2013). Regarding the EPG-Europarty relationship this means examining formal regulations for both institutions, their own formal and informal rules, and how their members utilise them in their everyday work. Conceptualising their relationship as one of informal governance allows exploring the 'scopes for action' between Europarties and political groups and what structures their interactions.

Furthermore, such an exploration includes asking about democratic legitimacy; a core concern of studies in informal politics (Reh 2014; Christiansen and Neuhold 2013). Traditionally conceptualised as output legitimacy (effectiveness and performance of policies) and input legitimacy (citizen engagement and governmental responsiveness), Schmidt (2020) provides *throughput legitimacy* as a third dimension. This "'black box" of governance' (Schmidt 2020: 8), comprises the procedural (and democratic) quality of political processes, i.e. ensuring participation, accountability, transparency, inclusion and equality. Variations in Europarty-EPG relationships provide a fruitful setting for investigating these aspects.

Importantly, actors shape formal and informal governance through micro-politics, thereby potentially transposing informal rules into formal ones; the Spitzenkandidatur is one example (Wiesner 2019). Thus, the current state of formal and informal relationships

between Europarties and EPGs and their appearance inside EP everyday politics holds explanatory power for future formal arrangements. Given the different history of EPGs, we furthermore expect that informal rules vary between the groups and imply different democratic practices.

Next to formal and informal rules and practices, we focus on the Spitzenkandidatur process as a recent prime example of deeper cooperation in supranational democracy and moreover the only recent supranational innovation already practiced. Usually investigated as clash between EP, Council and Commission (Peñalver García and Priestley 2015; Heidebreder and Schade 2020; De Wilde 2020), party political informal governance might be more virulent in this process (Wolfs, Put and Van Hecke, 2021; Fabbrini 2015). The ambiguity of article 17(7) Lisbon Treaty triggered fights between EP and Council about nomination responsibilities (Wiesner 2018; Christiansen 2016): the Council proposing a candidate and 'acting by qualified majority' or the EP electing 'the candidate' by 'majority of its component members'. Although article 17(7) conferred the EP a role in determining the next Commission President, the member state governments in the Council and the EP, its political groups and their respective Europarties needed to design the new process (Fabbrini 2015). Instead of triggering transnational political party competition, tensions were fostered by Europarties' claiming it their duty and right to nominate candidates, a broad interpretation of a process designed for EP and Council (Wiesner, 2018; Christiansen 2016: 1007). Europarties nominating candidates and the EPG electing the Commission president is still an informal process and depends on micro-politics in each EPG-Europarty pair; politics we explore in detail below after presenting methods and data.

METHODS AND DATA

While there are several well-suited methodological approaches to understand Europarty-EPG relationships, for instance, regarding voting patterns, election results of parties and MEPs, they provide less information on what it means for MEPs to work in the context of EPGs and their respective Europarty. How MEPs (and staff) use formal and informal rules and practices steers their everyday work regarding EPG and Europarty. Furthermore, in lieu of formal rules regulating the relationship, we expect informal governance is important. Yet, informal aspects cannot be collected via quantitative analysis since actors are often unaware of them themselves.

We use documentary analysis (Treaties, EP Rules of Procedure, Europarty and EPG statutes and websites) to scrutinise formal linkages and memberships. Informal interactions were captured through 135 semi-structured interviews conducted from 2018 to 2022 with MEPs and staff (assistants, political group staff, EP staff) from all political groups and non-attached MEPs. The sample ensured a diversity of member states, genders, seniority and functions. Among the interviewees were eight (deputy) Secretary Generals of the EPGs, who play a pivotal role in managing relationships with Europarties.

Building on grounded theory, the interviews were coded using Atlas.ti. Grounded theory enables generating a meta-theoretical explanation which is grounded in data (Creswell 2013) and provides a 'unified theoretical explanation' (Corbin and Strauss 2008: 107) shaped by the views of interviewees. Importantly, the informal rules were not necessarily described as such by our interviews, but carved out through our in-depth analysis of data. Codes were developed deductively from formal documents and academic literature and inductively from the participants' constructions themselves. Two first-level topical codes, that is, largely descriptive and low inference codes, were team-coded to sort through the abundant dataset. First, the inductive topical code 'Europarties', which was defined as 'how the political group/MEP relates to Europarty'. This included *behavioural* aspects: frequency and opportunities for Europarty contact and *attitudinal* aspects: feelings of relevance of the Europarty and its democratic credentials for MEPs' everyday work. This code was

inductive because the project did not explore Europarties from the outset. Rather, Europarties took on varying significance for the participants. We supplemented this with the deductive topical code 'Spitzenkandidatur' (defined as mentions of the Spitzenkandidatur process and (non) candidates).

Regarding our research questions, two theoretical codes were used in data analysis. These were: *formal interactions* comprising any mentions of statutes, EP Rules of Procedure or else; *informal interactions* defined as any description of routines, habits or processes not included in formal interactions and 'democratic practices' which we define following Schmidt's (2020) definition of 'throughput legitimacy'. Under *informal interactions*, higher order categories (Elliot 2018: 2852) were developed as an outcome of coding from smaller codes. These emergent categories were: leadership, levels of institutionalisation and attitudes towards European integration. The leadership category refers to focused codes: powers, policy leadership and political cohesion. Institutionalisation refers to the focused codes: the age of the Europarty; apparatus such as congresses and summits and ideological cohesion (Bressanelli 2014). Attitudes to EU integration refers to the subcodes of: condition, ends (what it is and should be) and means of achieving European integration.

Each code was cross-compared and analysed along political group lines allowing us to generate a 'thick description' of EPG-Europarty relationships from the perspective within the parliament (Wolfs, Put and Van Hecke 2021: 18).

FORMAL RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN EUROPARTIES AND EPGS

With the shift to direct EP elections in 1979, national parties responded by founding Europarties and the early Christian-conservatives, social-democratic and liberal were swiftly followed by green, regional and later those representing the fringes on both sides of the political spectrum (see Table 1 for overview). The EP Rules of Procedure (EPRoP) regulate political group formation with three criteria: (1) a minimum of 23 members of the European Parliament (MEPs), (2) representing at least seven member states, and (3) demonstrating political affinity. The EPRoP do not regulate relationships with Europarties and the number of Europarty MEPs and all EPG MEPs differs (see Table 1). Furthermore, Calossi and Cicchi (2019: 12-14) show the overlap between Europarty MEPs and EPG MEPs falls from the 2009-2014 to the 2014-2019 legislature. For the 2019-2024 legislature the trend continues for all political groups except for Identity and Democracy, successor of the EPG Europe of Nations and Freedom, and the European Conservatives and Reformists Party.

Table 1: Overview of Europarties represented in EP political groups

Europarty (founding year)	EPG 2019	MEPs Europarty/EPG		
		EPG/Europarty ratio in %		
		2009	2014	2019
Party of European Socialists (PES) (1974)	Socialists & Democrats (S&D)	161/184	181/189	117/146
		87.5%	95.8%	80.1%

Europarty (founding year)	EPG 2019	MEPs Europarty/EPG		
		EPG/Europarty ratio in %		
		2009	2014	2019
European People's Party (EPP) (1976)	European People's Party (EPP)	263/265	206/213	165/173 ¹
		99.2%	96.7%	95.4%
Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE) (1976)	Renew Europe	75/84	50/68	62/98
		89.3%	73.5%	63.3%
European Democratic Party (EDP) (2004)		9/84	7/68	11/98
		10.7%	10.3%	11.2%
European Green Party (EGP) ² (1984)	Greens/EFA	46/55	37/50	46/73
		83.6%	74%	63.0%
European Free Alliance (EFA) ³ (1981)		6/55	7/50	5/73
		10.9%	14%	6.8%
Party of the European Left (EL) (2004)	The Left in the European Parliament (GUE/NGL)	24/35	29/52	16 ⁴ /39
		68.6%	55.8%	41.0%
European Conservatives and Reformists Party (ECR) (2009)	European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR)	54/55	55/73	48/61 =
		98.2%	75.3%	78.7%
Identity & Democracy Party (ID) (2014)	Identity & Democracy (ID)	n.a.	28/40 ⁵	59/74
		n.a.	70.0%	89.7%

Sources: authors' own calculation as of June 2021 for 2019-2024; Calossi and Cicchi (2019: 13, 14) for 2009-2014 and 2014-2019.

Financing: Rules and Regulations Over Time

At the 2000 Nice summit, member states approved a Regulation on European Parties and their funding (into force in 2004).⁶ Europarties and EPGs were separated formally and spatially: Europarties moved out of EP offices, and instead of being subsidised by EPGs, they since received operational grants from the European Commission. Europarty financing was established as a distinct EP budget line in 2018 with the following criteria: registration with the Authority for European Political Parties and European Political Foundations (APPF), being represented in the EP by at least one MEP, executing external auditing, having their formal seat in a member state, and representation in at least one quarter of member states and in different assemblies.⁷ Through the distinct budget line, Europarties became 'emancipated' from the political groups and their national individual national member parties' subscriptions (Van Hecke, Andrienne-Moylan, Brack, Coninck et al. 2018), yet, EPGs receive more advanced resources compared to Europarties (Raunio and Johansson 2022). Moreover, when national party delegations join a political group, a Europarty attached to it can be an 'additional financial incentive', providing parties also access to Europarty resources (McDonnell and Werner 2019: 70).

Legal requirements for financing were further tightened by two regulations from 2014 and 2018 introducing a "EU values compliance mechanism" aiming to hold Europarties (and political groups respectively) accountable to fundamental rights and values enshrined in EU treaty bases; implementation is overseen by the APPF (Morijs 2019: 617; 624-631). Overall, the original dependency of Europarties from political groups disappeared partly and changed their relationship. Moreover, the legal framework arguably created unequal capacities and activities (Van Hecke et al. 2018): Newer Europarties have less resources and capacities than the established ones, which potentially impacts their institutionalisation and relationship with the political group. Meaningful overlap between the Europarty and the political group depends on how active the Europarty is. For example, McDonnell and Werner (2019: 182) note the ECR Europarty (formerly Alliance of Conservatives and Reformists (ACRE)) was inactive outside Brussels, indicating a lower level of institutionalisation.

Self-regulating Relationships of Europarties and EPGs

Political group formation is a core feature of the Europarty-political group relationship with only Europarty members becoming automatically EPG members⁸ (Ahrens and Kantola 2022). The changing formal relationship between Europarty and EPG manifests in party statutes. For instance, the EPP Europarty's statutes include the EPG as a constituent element which is a historical statement rather than a membership rule. The EPP Europarty sees the EPG's function as a 'parliamentary wing' (Jansen 1998) as opposed to the Left in the EP which defines not as a parliamentary wing of the European Left (Dunphy and March 2019). The European Green's statutes list national member parties as 'full members' and, if simultaneously EGP member and MEP, individual 'Special Membership', thereby creating a special status for their MEPs. Hertner (2019) found Europarties introduced individual party membership while party membership in EU member states dropped, yet, participatory rights differ considerably between Europarties and their grassroots members lack powers. Overall, Europarties 'essentially remain elite-driven organizations' with national parties as the key players (Hertner 2019: 501).

Europarties and EPGs developed formal rules and practices for their interactions. Party congresses are the highest decision-making body of the Europarties and the space to agree on resolutions, supranational election programs and manifestos to political groups. Indeed most Europarties produced integrated election programmes since the EP elections in 2009 (Wiesner 2019: 190). Often, EPG leaders are invited to give an address and in turn, Europarty leaders may be invited to EPG meetings or the Leaders' conference in pre-council summits, with potentially substantial effects on Intergovernmental Conferences and European Council Summits (Raunio 2021: 364). We found considerable overlap

between Europarties and EPGs in the governance of EPP, ECR, ID, EGP, for instance, as treasurers, or political group leaders holding *ex officio* positions in the Europarty bureaus and in their associated political foundations. The composition of the bureaus of Europarties can be highly politicised and seen as a litmus test of how comfortable a delegation is in a group, by the institutional responsibility taken on (Michalopoulos 2021). Likewise, Europarties and EPGs have 'decades of accumulated experience from building networks and coalitions in IGCs and inter-institutional bargaining rounds' (Johansson and Raunio 2022).

Whilst Europarties produce manifestos and resolutions, they are not policy-seeking in a straightforward way, because political groups form compromises to reach a majority in the EP. Instead, they 'serve as important arenas for the diffusion of ideas and policy coordination' (Raunio 2021: 362). Parties in a Europarty may also pursue side-agreements to reaffirm values, for example the Visegrad countries in the EPP. The policy relationship matters for democracy, if the relationship between EPGs and Europarties links political interests horizontally across the Union (Raunio 2021: 350).

SPITZENKANDIDATUR PROCESS

The candidature to the Commission President is mentioned in Europarties' statutes, internal regulations and charters with regard to electoral organs (EPP 2015, Article 16, Article 18; PES 2018, Article 3, Article 25.1; ALDE 2019a, chapter IV, Article 15 (e); ALDE 2019b, Subsection V, 10; EDP Statutes Article 17; European Free Alliance 2021 p.2). In comparison, the PES statute puts the most emphasis on transparency and competitiveness, whilst the EFA stresses democratic elections to the Commission Presidency. In 2014, Five Europarties – EPP, PES, ALDE, EGP and EL – selected one (or two) candidates. Eurosceptic parties 'saw this development as too "federalist" and refused to appoint Spitzenkandidaten' (Lefkofridi and Katsanidou 2018: 1469).

Within the EP, the Spitzenkandidatur consolidated the EP's pro-integrationist 'grand coalition' (Christiansen 2016: 1007). Nevertheless, there are hidden tensions in the Europarty-EPG relationship: Europarties nominate candidates in elections, while the EPG with the majority of seats provides the Commission president who then should be elected (together with all Commissioners) by EPGs securing a majority of votes. Given decreasing shares of Europarty MEPs in the majority of EPGs and some EPGs comprising several Europarties (see Table 1), future EPs may face interesting democratic challenges, for instance, for issues of 'vertical linkage' (Raunio 2021: 349). In such a setting, it is unclear what happens if an EPG holds the majority of EP seats, but its dominating Europarty received less votes than a competing one or if the EPG comprises two Europarties, which would in effect mean no majority of seats for any of the two. Who will be in the position to claim the next Commission president: the Europarty winning the majority of votes or the EPG having the majority of seats? Thus, next to the formal rules for Europarties and EPGs, informal governance between the two can become ever more important for EU democracy, particularly for contested and non-binding procedures such as the Spitzenkandidatur.

MEPs, EUROPARTIES, EPGs: INTERACTING FORMAL AND INFORMAL ARRANGEMENTS

Next to formal overlaps between the EPGs and Europarties, further conflicts arise in everyday interactions. From our interview data, we found three constructions structuring the relationships between political groups and Europarties: leadership, the level of institutionalization of the Europarty and attitudes to European integration. Building on our semi-structured interviews, we interrogate simultaneously the views of 'ordinary' MEPs

about 'their' Europarty and EPG and the Spitzenkandidatur as a particularly valuable case for exploring Europarty-EPG interactions.

Leadership, Coordination and Individual Members

The first theme structuring the relationship between EPGs-Europarty relationships was the powers, proclivities and relationships between those in Europarty and EPG leadership positions and everyday members. Formally, we know several MEPs and political group staff like Secretary Generals hold leadership positions in the Europarty. Switching between MEP and Europarty positions is not uncommon. Europarties are larger than EPGs, so leaders of the Europarties should formally have more powers. However, informally, we know less about how this works *in practice* and the views of MEPs and staff in non-political leadership positions. Tensions here were most pronounced for the EPP.

Given the heterogeneity of membership in political groups and Europarties, political leadership is key for political cohesion. One MEP felt the EPP Europarty did not have much capacity to discipline national delegations who deviated ideologically, such as Fidesz and therefore 'guaranteeing the, overarching, cohesion in the political party' which was further tested when physical meetings were prohibited during Covid (EPP MEP M 120121; see also Renew Staff M 120221). Political leaders as 'unifiers' were described as important, albeit strong regarding Fidesz. In 2019 Fidesz was originally only suspended from the EPP Party, before leaving both Europarty and EPG 'voluntarily' in 2021, pre-empting threats of being thrown out permanently (Brzozowski and Makszimov 2021).

A senior member of the ID EPG suggested high profile cooperation between the group and Europarty leaders was mutually beneficial to show transnational cooperation from a movement to a party:

The link is direct and more direct than before even. Before it was the group and the movement it was quite far away and we didn't know exactly how it worked to get what kind of material we could transfer to the party but now we are working very well together. Especially Mr. Zanni and the President met in Antwerp to show that the European party, the ID party, is very well organised now and can show off with a good working team and a good working capacity to organise. So it works well. (ID MEP M 120320)

Administrative leadership and personnel overlaps result in designated responsibilities. Some EPG (Deputy) Secretary Generals are responsible for 'relationships with external partners', including the Europarties. Furthermore, a former Secretary General noted 'tensions between the leading figures automatically spreads to those around them' and especially to staff (Jansen 1998: 175). As for EPP, inter-staff mobility between EPG and Europarty and interactions with leaders were often highlighted. Former Europarty staff, now EPG staff, identified critical actors as 'granddad figures' and active 'kick-ass' women in the Europarties (EPP APA F 160320). EPG staff with an individual EPP party membership constructed themselves as supranational party actors. Nevertheless, some felt disillusioned by the long-term official EPP position on the Hungarian Fidesz. Meanwhile, a member of GUE/NGL described the European Left as a 'messy organisation' (GUE/NGL Staff M 240220), indicating no direct attachment to the party via the EPG.

Policy leadership in EPGs and Europarties is important for ideology and policies. Staff described the benefit of being able to draw on formal resolutions adopted at an EPP Party Congress regarding policy development: 'Well actually we already have that, this is nothing new. You can't object, your name is beside it already, so we do lean on that' (EPP APA F 160320). Regarding programmatic and policy development, PES moved from a confederation to a party in 1992, meaning a common programme was developed. However, in practice, S&D MEPs develop positions on more 'concrete issues' and vote 'in very specific issues every week' whereas PES deals with 'more long-term and fundamental

political positions' and this coordination is achieved before the council meetings when PES meets with the leader of the S&D group (S&D MEP M 271120).

How do these differences in the roles, relationships and powers of the leadership play out in the selection, election and significance of Spitzenkandidatur for political groups? Previous Commission presidents were always prominent national politicians, all of them with leadership positions like prime minister. Many of the candidates in 2014 and 2019 originated from the EP political groups and never held a prominent position in national or supranational politics (Peñalver García and Priestley 2015). Despite discussions about 'fitting' candidates from member states, in particular in 2014 (Peñalver García and Priestley 2015), many candidates were recruited from political groups and their standing vis-a-vis the Council members needs to be scrutinized as a factor for Commission president proposals. Indeed, De Wilde (2020: 51) suggests successful candidates in 2024 will be 'charismatic polyglot individuals, with credible executive experience' and GUE/NGL's candidates suffered in this respect.

Regarding political leadership, the 2019 Spitzenkandidatur process was important for the EPP as likely victors, yet the EPP party faced tensions despite being well organized and having sufficient resources to campaign in capitals. Two MEPs, former Finnish prime minister Alexander Stubb and German Manfred Weber (then EPG group leader) put themselves forward as candidates. The different roles and experiences allowed Stubb to present himself as an outsider, whilst Weber implicitly drew on his position as leader of the largest group, promoting his candidacy as 'an extension of European-style coalition politics, in which it is only natural that the leader of the largest group in parliament should be asked to lead the government' (Herszenhorn and De La Baume 2018).

Our interviewees suggested that not only was the selection of candidates untransparent and almost undemocratic at an EU level, but at national level, there was also a lack of communication regarding candidate ambitions:

[In the ALDE Party] I think it is mainly Verhofstadt and mainly him who tries to get the people. Because when they had the meeting, I have heard that the ALDE Party leader, Baalen, was criticized, and there was no order. Actually I don't know how it is, it is very undemocratic. [One candidate is] very competent ... And I have heard that she has given her permission, and it's between her and the party leader. I think nobody knows. Not the party. They don't know in the party that she might be the Spitzenkandidat. That's interesting. (ALDE MEP F 210219)

This mystique around candidate ambitions and recruitment was also in GUE/NGL when Mary Lou Robinson (Sinn Fein) had been approached when Sinn Fein were electorally successful nationally (GUE/NGL Staff M 210220). Interestingly, Sinn Fein is not a member, observer or partner party of the Party of the European Left.

The election of Von Der Leyen fed into considerations within Renew of distributing other leadership positions:

In the run-up to the adoption of the Commission's programme, [we've said] that we want a Conference on the Future of Europe, and we want that to be chaired by a member of the Renew Group, a liberal, ideally Guy Verhofstadt in my view, who would then take a look at the whole Spitzenkandidatur system and the whole process of, how democratic and accountable the creation of the commission is and...even more directly involving the citizens of Europe, not just the political groups and the elected MEPs. (Renew MEP M 131219).

Interestingly, the MEP speaks about the role of the EPGs, but not the Europarties, in the Spitzenkandidatur, although the latter put forward candidates.

Different from the previous EPGs, the selection procedure for the Spitzenkandidatur was largely designed by the ECR political group (Wolfs, Put and Van Hecke 2021: 10), not the Europarty. The process lacked formal democratic rules and allowed a former leader of the political group to emerge as the lead candidate:

We didn't have a vote because there was only one candidate who basically put themselves forward and wanted to do it, and so it was just acclamation of that particular candidate. We didn't have a process. We had a candidate who was a previous president of the group, who was a compromise president in the group when we had trouble, who represented a smallish member state. It ticked all those boxes. (ECR MEP M 310119).

In 2014, the Greens elected their lead candidates by online voting, but as De Wilde (2020: 41) suggests they in 2019 'resorted to only giving party insiders a voice in the selection of their preferred candidate, narrowing down the scope and public resonance of the selection of Spitzenkandidaten'.

Furthermore, administrative leaders might informally engage in Spitzenkandidatur campaigns. A member of group staff identified underexploited levers of official representation in the Europarty's bureau and they had a 'role to play' to ensure the national parties are informed and prepared for the Spitzenkandidat to put diverse candidates forward and to address gender equality 'first', 'well in advance' and 'not only in the last minute' (S&D Staff M 290419). Political group staff were also asked by administrative leaders to 'step in' to put out fires and provide 'crisis communications', despite simultaneously being prohibited from the campaign itself, due to separate funding sources for different Europarties represented in the EPG (GUE/NGL Staff M 210220).

Regarding policy leadership, the S&D political group's leader, Udo Bullman's office had developed a 'battle plan' for the 2019 European Elections, which was presented at a group meeting as a good testing tool to see 'which candidate aligns up first with the battle plan'. However, the proposal was implicitly criticized as not adhering to S&D democratic principles, because it wasn't being opened up for amendments and solely voted upon by the EPG. Therefore the group may develop its own methods to hold the Spitzenkandidat accountable, but the content of these methods itself may be subject to exclusionary practices.

Level of Institutionalisation

The second theme structuring the relationship between EPGs and their Europarties was their degree of institutionalisation. Some MEPs enter the EP with pre-established links with their Europarty and this helps their everyday work in the political group and networks and forming compromises and negotiations within the group (S&D MEP F 300119; Renew Group Staff M 120221). Whilst the S&D was criticised as elite driven, tensions were more pronounced for GUE/NGL and ECR.

The ECR political group is younger than the ECR Party which was formed in 2009 as Alliance of Conservatives and Reformists (ACRE) and recently changed to the name ECR Party. For the ECR any meaningful overlap between the Europarty and the political group depends on how active the Europarty is across Europe (McDonnell and Werner 2019: 182). Steven (2020: 84) sees the ECR Party as serving a *global* purpose for networking and convening around the intellectual idea of Conservatism, rather than policy development. Links between MEPs and the ECR party are not as strong as for other Europarties. One MEP stated 'I've never been to any [ACRE] meetings ... this doesn't [affect everyday working]' (ECR MEP F 210219).

Europarties' congresses are key to institutionalization, though they became compromised during Covid. Next to EPP, PES is the oldest Europarty with long traditions of party congresses and well-established roots in all member states. However, when asked about

the meaning of the Europarty, and its congress for the MEP's everyday work, two MEPs spoke about the different experiences of 'ordinary' or 'normal' MEPs 'not necessarily included in this mechanism' and has 'not so much' relevance 'to be frank' and the EPG 'elite' who belonged to PES (S&D MEP M 161018; S&D MEP M 020320). A part of this originated from the unclear mechanisms for being a delegate for the PES congress for example, who come from national parties (S&D MEP M 020320). Indeed, one MEP concurred: 'I'm not aware of having been invited to one' (S&D MEP M 020320). Conversely, an MEP felt empowered to be actively involved in PES and she framed her involvement along a continuum of participation of MEPs, saying: 'it's not enough to simply turn up to committees if you want to be effective in the parliament' (S&D MEP F 300119). She suggested she was given responsibilities by S&D based on her track record of being involved in PES activities.

A respondent in the ALDE party at the end of their parliamentary career, contrasted the ALDE Party congress where 'declarations' were made with other priorities to use their power as MEP:

If I were young it might be possible that I would like to go. But, I have been so many years in politics and I know that the party congress is. They make declarations, and it's not always, they way you, I want to use my power. (ALDE MEP F 210219)

Meanwhile if there are multiple Europarties attached to the group, then Deputy Secretary Generals must be vigilant not to show favouritism to one and will often abstain from all of their congresses.

Tensions emerging from formal rules around political group formation can informally induce destabilization in both Europarties and EPGs. Although Europarties and political groups are formally connected, their composition is not identical, quite contrary often (Calossi and Cicchi, 2019). Political groups build on Europarties but also include non-party members, split of Europarty members across political groups, and sometimes national delegations switching political groups despite their Europarty membership (Ahrens and Kantola, 2022). Nevertheless, one MEP constructed the EPP Party as unwieldy and difficult to coordinate, because 'the EPP party is of course way bigger' (EPP MEP M 120121). Both Renew's group leader, Dacian Cioloș' party and then Stéphane Séjourné's En Marche are not in the ALDE Party, but are a cornerstone of the new Renew EPG. Similarly, an ECR MEP, despite their national party being a member, criticized ACRE because of the overall right wing outlook: 'I think they're a ghastly right-wing organisation. And I think [ACRE] includes the AKP. Erdogan is in that, I mean, they are very right-wing, and people like the Secretary General, who campaigned to leave very strongly' (ECR MEP F 210219; see Steven 2020: 85).

The Greens/EFA EPG, home to two different Europarties, the European Green Party (EGP) and European Free Alliance (EFA), constructed the EPG as an informative tool about shared values. Because the Greens are electorally successful predominantly in Northwestern Europe, the Europarty was also used to develop the reach and positioning of the political group in South and Eastern Europe (Greens/EFA MEP F 100320). The relationship between GUE/NGL and its various Europarties - the Party of the European Left, Nordic Green Left Alliance (NGLA), Now the People! - is arguably more fraught. When asked about the relationship between the Europarty and the group, an MEP said: 'You are very painstaking, you know us well, huh' (GUE/NGL MEP M 231020), implying internal tensions. Leadership is important for institutionalisation. In the GUE/NGL co-presidency, Martin Schirdewan's German Die Linke is a member of the Party of the European Left, while Manon Aubry's La France Insoumise is not and aligned with Now the People!. However, according to one interviewee: 'They are backing for example these European forums on the European Left both so I would not say that there's a big difference between the former presidency and the current presidency' (GUE/NGL MEP M 231020).

How do these differences play out in the selection, election and significance of the Spitzenkandidatur? Similar to EPP, PES had sufficient resources to fund tours of the capitals, something harder for smaller Europarties. The Spitzenkandidatur was of lower importance to the ECR MEPs as compared to aforementioned EPGs, probably because ACRE struggled with its lack of ready-made transnational cooperation and infrastructure for events. As for Identity and Democracy (I&D), one of the youngest Europarties and EPGs in the EP after restructuring the previous Europe of Nations and Freedom (ENF), the relationship is unsurprisingly much in flux and our interviewees had not any comment on the Spitzenkandidatur process. One MEP described the relevance of the Europarty for his everyday work and national party in merely pragmatic terms:

Nothing very much actually ... it was very logical that we also join with the political party all over Europe, the ID Party. So, it's only some impact for the everyday work. If there's coming some events or political campaigns, connected with European level, you can use this ID Party, European party for these political events or conferences or campaigns. But not everyday work. So it means that they don't really know about it and that's why I think there is no really big impact. (I&D MEP M 130320)

Despite the formal institution of individual membership, in the EPP's congress, only delegates, rather than individual members, could vote on the outcome in a secret ballot (De Wilde 2020: 41). Informally, the national delegations often decide who they will campaign for. The EPP member parties in Finland, Sweden, Estonia, and Latvia were large supporters of Stubb, albeit small national delegations in the EPP EPG. For PES and S&D, the congress provides an interactive forum for nominating the lead candidate with special facilitating roles by MEPs:

The group has delegates to the congress and of course the MEPs are the ones that move around. Know everybody. Talk to everybody much more than the national party delegations do in frequently participating European level areas. So the group's influence on the choice of the Spitzenkandidat the lead candidate is not insignificant. The national executive of our national party looked asked: 'who is Frans Timmermans? Is he okay?' and I was saying yes. He's a very good choice. So you informally influence your own party as well pretty often. (S&D MEP M 271120)

The 2019 Spitzenkandidatur process was a crucial aspect of Renew's political group formation. Macron favoured transnational lists to lead candidates. According to De Wilde (2020: 41), 'ALDE's half-hearted participation' in the Spitzenkandidatur process was to 'woo Macron's party to join them after the election'. Increasing the Renew group size promised political stability and influence.

Stances on European Integration

The final theme we found that structured the relationship between EPGs and their Europarties was key actors' constructions of the condition, ends and means of European integration. Tensions were more pronounced in ECR and EFDD.

Regarding the condition of European integration, an EPP MEP said citizen knowledge of the EPP EPG is 'very little', though suggested in their Central Eastern European member state, the EPP Party was slightly better known' (EPP MEP F 120320). MEPs' involvement in PES Europarty activity was constrained by Euroscepticism: 'I've never been to [a PES Congress] ... we stopped doing [away days] on purpose...for the Daily Mail reasons...we never go on, S&D corporate things anymore (S&D MEP M 161018). The MEP notably uses a discourse of 'corporate' rather than campaigning.

Meanwhile, several UK MEPs considered the Europarties as a key connection to EU affairs after the UK's withdrawal.

I had never been a member of ALDE party until I was elected as an MEP. I am a member. I was wondering about going for a seat on the congress or the council. I think it's inevitable that relationships will very much walk us around it. (Renew MEP F 240220; see also Greens/EFA MEP F 210120).

Leaders' interpretations of the concepts of Eurorealism and Euroscepticism as ends, can explain the differences in the significance of the Spitzenkandidatur. The attitudes towards Europarties and the Spitzenkandidatur of Jan Zahradil (ECR group leader 2011, ACRE chair and lead candidate 2019) and Daniel Hannan (former MEP and ACRE Secretary General until 2018) differ. Hannan, a Eurosceptic, prioritises looking outwards to sister parties around the world and to Eastern Europe than inwards towards the EU (Steven 2020: 87). One interviewee stated 'we have a problem because we don't agree with the Spitzenkandidat procedure. We think it's ridiculous and against the treaties' (ECR MEP M 310119). Meanwhile, some ECR MEPs would nonetheless debate the Spitzenkandidatur in their own countries, and whilst not delivering a Commission President, for them, it stimulated debate in candidates' member states (ECR MEP M 040320).

Dissolved after the 2019 elections, our interviewees from EFDD were the most critical of Europarties who were understood as an artificial construction:

We are only forced into these ludicrous parties by the EU, we don't believe in them, that's one of the reasons why we're leaving. This place has nothing to do with democracy and everything to do with how the EU wants the world to be. They want to dictate what party you're a member of, what you think and now they even say, you can't be a member of a grouping if we don't like the way you think. So basically it's the thought police, this is a dictatorship. (EFDD MEP M 290119_3)

How do differences in institutionalisation play out in the selection, election and significance of lead candidates? De Wilde (2020) suggests Europarties' inability to successfully transform the 2019 European elections into 'first-order' elections contributed to Manfred Weber (EPP) being unable to assume the position of Commission President. Immediately after the 2019 elections, the mainstream political groups in the EP insisted to only elect one of their lead candidates and not an 'external' candidate; until Ursula von der Leyen was proposed. The interest of national parties was astonishingly low despite the most powerful EU position at disposal; the biggest attention occurred in the lead candidates' home countries (Gattermann and de Vreese 2020). Some national Europarty members, for instance from the UK, even avoided engaging in the Spitzenkandidatur as early as 2014 as EU membership was already too contested (Braun and Popa 2018). Simultaneously, the Spitzenkandidatur process was rejected by Macron's Renew in favour of creating more transnational lists.

Differing constructions on the means and ends of European integration affected what MEPs prioritised: Europarties as important for supranational democracy for presenting candidates to the electorate or political groups as crucial parliamentary actors for oversight and voting:

It is very important to keep the notion that in the end the leader of the European Commission has to be elected in the European Parliament. That is very important the parliament has a democratic role of scrutiny. (S&D MEP M 231220)

Despite the Green Europarty nominating Ska Keller and Bas Eickhout, interviewees shared critical views of Spitzenkandidatur's fate, notably the anti-democratic nature of Ursula von der Leyen's election in 2018:

That was a failure of European politics ... the argument that there you could make is that "this is how democracy works" ... and in fact, what you have then is a messy compromise. (Greens/EFA MEP F 210120)

The EFDD EPG was composed of two large delegations. One EFDD respondent replied: 'What is a Spitzenkandidat, I've never heard of one, what is a Spitzenkandidat? We put Nigel Farage but more likely that, Frans Timmermans is going to have a sex change, don't you think?' (EFDD, MEP M 290119). Meanwhile, the 14 Five Star MEPs claimed to have voted for von der Leyen, contributing to her nine-vote-majority. A senior Five Stars MEP, Fabio Castaldo suggested in a speech⁹ the Spitzenkandidatur system was elite-driven by parachuting candidates into localities, overriding civil society representation.

In sum, leadership, institutionalisation and constructions of European integration are significant for how 'everyday' MEPs and staff engage with 'their' Europarty and for supranational democracy more broadly. Despite the Spitzenkandidatur's democratic potentials, we find misunderstanding, informal coordination, and at worst - a lack of affective engagement. Given how important congresses are to the linkage between the Europarty, EPG and Spitzenkandidatur, it is surprising that engagement is uneven, leading to the perception among 'ordinary' MEPs that the Spitzenkandidatur is elite-driven. Likewise, the means and ends of European integration create tensions between Europarties and EPGs and this is further nuanced with internal debates within political groups, such as the Eurorealists and Euroscepticists of ECR.

The Spitzenkandidatur was developed as an informal rule by key federalist actors at a time of legitimacy crisis for the EU, thereby showing the relationships between the Europarties and EPGs are important. However, given our findings, it is unlikely the Spitzenkandidatur will fundamentally change the relationship between Europarties and EPGs and it remains to be seen how both will restructure their strategies towards the Spitzenkandidatur in 2024.

CONCLUSION

This article provided important insights into the everyday informal governance of EPG-Europarty relationships, its micropolitics and the democratic practices related to them. While previous literature covered their development and implications for EU integration (Switek 2016; Raunio 2021; Hix and Lord 1997; Bressanelli 2014; Bardi 1994), our article contributes by detailing the formal and informal relationships and their value for everyday politics in the EP.

We found the formal and informal links between the two have significant democratic effects, especially regarding the Spitzenkandidatur process. While Europarties are important for supranational democracy for presenting candidates to the electorate, the European Commission and its president are ultimately elected by EPGs who secure the necessary majority in votes. Regarding 'throughput legitimacy' (Schmidt 2020), executive accountability and transparency is at stake - contingent on whether the Spitzenkandidatur could become a power base for EU integration and helps increase citizen participation and inclusion. Moreover, the patterns observed for the Spitzenkandidatur may apply to other institutional proposals such as transnational lists. In May 2022 the EP adopted its position on reforming the European Electoral Act, including establishing transnational lists by either a European political party, a European association of voters or by other European electoral entity. Given these different entities, it remains unclear whether, for instance, non-Europarty members could join a Europarty list or, once elected, if national parties can join any EPG despite competing on a different transnational list.

Given the Spitzenkandidatur and transnational lists are topics for the Conference on the Future of Europe, relationships between EPGs and Europarties may be recast in ways

relevant to EU democracy (Johansson and Raunio 2022). Currently the whole system relies on informal rules and practices between Europarties and EPGs, thus with in-built deficiencies regarding democratic transparency and accountability for citizens and national parties. Without formal rules and the discrepancy in the number of Europarty representatives and EPG MEPs, the election of the Commission president – even without the publicly dominating clashes between EP and Council (Heidbreder and Schade 2020; De Wilde 2020) – could cause deadlock. This could materialize in case the EPG with the majority of seats refuses to elect a preferred Council candidate who can claim the majority of Europarty votes. Unquestionably, the Spitzenkandidatur system is complex and under constant flux, but, given upcoming changes to the European Electoral Act, is set to stay.

Then again, our findings show that despite Europarties' new powers in the Spitzenkandidatur, this topic was unimportant to MEPs and Europarties were even framed as 'external actors' in EPG (Deputy) Secretary Generals portfolios. Instead, according to our interviewees, Europarty-EPG relationships are structured along three themes: leadership, the level of institutionalisation of the Europarty and attitudes to European integration.

Our qualitative approach covering the views of MEPs and EP staff invites further research on Europarty-EPG interactions from different angles. Surely, investigating the counterpart, the organization of the Europarty regarding their EPG, the role of their leadership in shaping EPGs and thus EU policymaking, and how they engage with EU citizen's would provide crucial insights in supranational party politics and EU democracy. Connected to this, quantitative analysis of voting cohesion for Europarty vs EPG MEPs, thereby scrutinizing the role of national party delegations for Europarties and EPGs would help to understand the development of true supranational Europarties. This would include examining the impact of Europarty programmes on national election manifestos or, through Social Network Analysis, exploring party-political networks. Likewise, how new non-Europarty EPG members such as En Marche in Renew or leaving ones like Fidesz in EPP shape the Europarty were not studied.

Overall, our research supports recent literature in that the parliamentarisation of EU politics came to a halt or is, at least, always dependent on member states governments willingness to share powers (Crum 2022). The more informal governance of Europarty-EPG ties prove this further and suggest to trace democratic legitimacy across these multiple layers, i.e. linkages between Europarties, their national members and how each are represented in governments but also EPGs.

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ENDNOTES

¹ The 165 MEPs are calculated after the Hungarian Fidesz left EPP in March 2021. It includes three independent MEPs where it is unclear whether they are still individual members of the EPP Party.

² The European Greens Statutes list 55 MEPs as 'Special Members'.

³ The European Free Alliance political group part has three MEPs from ECR Party and one EL Party MEP.

⁴ Excluding La France Insoumise (6), AKEL (2) or KSCM (1) who are observer parties.

⁵ 2014 data for ID's predecessor Movement for a Europe of Nations and Freedom (MENF)/Europe of Nations and Freedom group.

⁶ Regulation (EC) No 2004/2003 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 4 November 2003 on the regulations governing political parties at European level and the rules regarding their funding. OJ L 297, 15.11.2003.

⁷ Online: <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/contracts-and-grants/en/political-parties-and-foundations>. Accessed 10 September 2019.

⁸ Some Europarty members sign up for a different EPG than their Europarty (see Table 1).

⁹ Online: <https://www.fabiomassimocastaldo.it/sistema-degli-spitzenkandidaten-non-sia-paracadute-politici-senza-consenso-occasione-allargare-dibattito-democratico-partecipazione/>

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Research Article

Preliminary Insights into the Formation of Minimal Winning Coalitions in Western Europe

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Abstract

Coalition governments have prompted a stream of prominent research since the birth of modern political science. Several studies have been performed on the lifecycles of cabinets, focusing particularly on their formation and duration. The first investigations into such issues were carried out using game theoretic approaches. In their ground-breaking works, William Riker and Lawrence Dodd argued that office-seeking outcomes, i.e. minimal winning coalitions, are more frequent and stable than other cabinet types. However, more recent research suggests that this proposition is disputable. By relying on an original multilevel dataset on West European cabinets, this study examines the actual rationality of minimal winning coalitions by asking whether they have been more recurrent than different government formulae, as predicted by game theory. The analysis finds that such coalitions have not been formed more frequently than non-rational cabinet solutions, i.e., oversized majority cabinets. In addition, the article showcases that minimal winning coalitions may occur in both polarised and less polarised West European political systems. By shedding light on office-based game theoretic propositions and their observable empirical records, this study contributes to the scientific examination of a fundamental stage of democratic governance in Western Europe.

Keywords

Minimal winning coalitions; Office-seeking; Government formation; Western Europe; Governments

INTRODUCTION

Traditionally, government formation has been at the core of political scientists' investigations. The issue has prompted considerable interest, as it shows tremendous empirical variation. In Belgium, since 1946, the average duration of the government formation process has been 60 days. In the Netherlands, parties take almost an average of 80 days to find a ruling solution. Conversely, countries such as Denmark, Greece and France spend less than 20 days in negotiations. Variation can also be found in relation to government duration. Italian governments have an average duration of almost one year. By contrast, German cabinets have a much longer lifetime, with an average duration of three years. Government formation and duration remained distinct research fields for a long time; until the path-breaking work by Strøm et al. (2008) on the *coalition lifecycle* approach. Each stage of the coalition lifecycle, namely, government formation, governance, and government termination, influence one another. In a nutshell, what happens in the embryonic phase of a government's life matters when it comes to its death. This integrated strategy is currently used in most research on cabinets and coalition governments (Bergman et al. 2021). Following this approach, we use a dynamic perspective focusing on the minimal winning criterion.

For decades, one of the most popular assumptions in coalition government research is that minimal winning coalitions are more recurrent and stable than other cabinet types (Riker 1962; Dodd 1976). In particular, Riker's theory of coalition formation posits that parties strive for the smallest number of government partners to achieve the highest share of executive power. This *size principle* is reported in political science from game theoretic notions of economic behaviour (Von Neumann and Morgenstern 1947). However, recent theoretical developments have revealed that such propositions are disputable (Mitchell and Nyblade 2008). Along with office-seeking conceptions of party behaviour, two other major theoretical and conceptual frameworks explain government formation: vote-seeking assumptions (Downs 1957) and policy-seeking perspectives (De Swaan 1973). Over the past decades, political scientists interested in the lifecycles of cabinets have empirically examined game theoretical propositions. The results display unique national variation (Franklin and Mackie 1984) and the spread of *non-rational* undersized and oversized governments (Müller and Strøm 2000).

Scholars have also discussed whether policy objectives or office ambitions move political actors. A challenging problem arising in this domain is the precise definition and empirical evidence of office- or policy-seeking parties. This is typically a complex problem, as parties' strategies may differ according to bargaining situations. In this regard, it has been argued that political formations must deal with trade-offs (Warwick 2005), requiring tough decisions between policies and offices (Strøm and Müller 1999). Harmel and Janda (1994) argued that parties' goals can also be influenced by external shocks, namely, external stimuli directly related to performance considerations on parties' primary goals.

As government formation has a long research tradition, theories on the occurrence of coalition types have been widespread. Before Dodd's (1976) proposition on the higher stability of minimal winning coalitions, Lowell (1896) pointed out that single-party majority governments provide greater stability than other cabinet types in parliamentary systems. In his book *Conflict of Interest*, Axelrod (1970) argued that minimal connected winning coalitions are both likelier to be formed and are more stable than other coalitions. The existing body of research suggests that game theoretic propositions may be ineffective in explaining the outcomes of coalition bargaining in Europe (Müller and Strøm 2000). Likewise, studies of government duration have shown contrasting results. On the one hand, minimal winning coalitions have proved effective in boosting government duration (Warwick 1979; Schofield 1987). On the other hand, recent studies have demonstrated that minority governments (non-rational solutions according to the size principle) are not generally less stable than other cabinet types (Krauss and Thürk 2021).

The present research updates previous studies that tested whether minimal winning coalitions are more recurrent compared with different cabinet types. With this aim in mind, an original multilevel dataset of about 700 cabinets in 20 Western European countries in the post-1945 era

was constructed. This study enlarges the temporal framework of past contributions by considering the post-Great Recession period (from 2008). Although this update is preliminary, it improves our understanding of parties' office-based motivations in Europe. In the context of multilevel governance, ruling parties are increasingly under pressure. Such a tendency was highlighted by Peter Mair (2009) with the responsiveness–responsibility dilemma. On the one hand, political parties in Western Europe need to be *responsive* to short-term demands from voters, the media and interest groups. On the other hand, they should be *responsible* when dealing with long-term needs and international commitments (Bardi et al. 2014). In these conditions, office-based motivations may be less appealing for political formations and party leaders, who might seek to avoid the electoral costs of ruling.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. The second section overviews previous literature on government formation and coalitions. Then, it introduces the research questions and expectations of the analysis. The third section focuses on the data and methodology used for this study. The fourth section presents the observable records, focusing on the two key themes that inform the study—the occurrence of minimal winning coalitions. The last part discusses the implications of the results and concludes.

BACKGROUND

Coalition theory has been the subject of many classic studies in political science. Since being first studied in the 1960s and 1970s by political scientists interested in game theory, the topic has continued to draw much attention. Riker's size principle represents one of the first game theoretical accounts concerning the issue. Precisely, it is predicted that 'In n-person, zero-sum games, where side-payments are permitted, where players are rational, and where they have perfect information, only minimal winning coalitions occur' (Riker 1962: 32). More generally, it is argued that participants create coalitions just as large as they believe will ensure winning and no larger (Riker 1962: 47). The size principle has been interpreted in terms of the number of seats controlled (Gamson 1961; Riker 1962) and the number of parties involved (Leiserson 1966). Along these lines, it is argued that to achieve the highest utility resulting from the bargaining process, parties strategically adopt office-seeking behaviour, striving to maximise governmental posts. Thus, political formations will avoid forming *overwhelming majorities*.

Drawing upon game theoretic analysis of economic behaviour (Von Neumann and Morgenstern 1947), Riker's size principle posits that all non-winning coalitions are either blocking or losing (Riker 1962: 40). Therefore, if parties are rational and have perfect information, they will opt for a minimal winning solution. While Downs (1957) argued that electoral considerations move parties, Riker emphasised the primary goal of reaching ruling positions. Subsequent studies have suggested that policy distance and ideological considerations are the main alternative explanations for parties' coalition behaviour (Axelrod 1970; De Swaan 1973). However, both competing perspectives include references to winning coalitions, thus refining, rather than neglecting, Riker's size principle by also considering the role of policy preferences. In this way, it has been argued that both office seeking and policy pursuit can plausibly be assumed to motivate coalition actors (Budge and Laver 1986), emphasising the importance of a combination of size and preferences (Laver and Shepsle 1996). Nevertheless, as mentioned previously, choosing between policies, offices, and votes might be difficult and painful. Political parties are often called on to make difficult decisions in order to find the optimal solution amongst different trade-offs (Strøm 1990; Strøm and Müller 1999).

The past years have seen increasingly rapid advances in the field of government formation and coalition theory. Political science scholars have attempted to empirically verify game theorists' classic propositions using multivariate testing. The findings show significant country variations and that government formation in Western Europe did not follow the predicted outcomes (e.g. Mitchell and Nyblade 2008). In particular, the spread of two non-rational governing formulae, i.e. minority governments and oversized majorities, put the validity of the size principle under tremendous pressure. While the former coalition is a frequent solution for cases in which

negative electoral consequences are considerably high, the latter occurs when information is incomplete and policies are the main parties' concern (Strøm 1990).

During the past decades, all the components of minimal winning coalitions, namely, *minimal winning*, *winning* and *coalition*, have not been held in practice in Western Europe. Investigating 17 West European countries, Mitchell and Nyblade (2008) found that non-rational cabinets have been significantly more common than expected and that minimal winning coalitions account for 30.5% of the governments formed in their sample. These findings are surprising, as minority governments and oversized coalitions are considered non-rational according to office-based theories (Andeweg et al. 2011). Furthermore, coalition studies have not focused solely on the government formation process. Minimal winning coalitions are also considered to be more stable than other cabinet types (Riker 1962; Dodd 1976; Diermeier and Merlo 2000: 63). Dodd (1974: 1094) proposed that 'minimal winning cabinets will be quite durable. Oversized and undersized cabinets will be more transient'. As highlighted by Grofman (1989), Dodd made several crucial propositions. First, minimal winning coalitions tend to form in multi-party systems that are de-fractionalised and not extremely polarised. Second, oversized cabinets tend to form in multi-party systems that are fractionalised and non-conflictual. Finally, undersized cabinets tend to form in multi-party systems that are fractionalised and highly conflictual.

Scholars of government stability have included cabinet types as explanatory variables in their studies, demonstrating the impact on both government duration (Warwick 1979; Schofield 1987) and termination (Saalfeld 2008). Other features of cabinet structures have also been analysed, highlighting how reducing the number of parties in government increases coalition stability (Leiserson 1966; 1968). However, cabinet structures are not the only significant factors in explaining government duration. Research has shown the role of different agents, such as party systems' characteristics (King et al. 1990; Warwick 1992), critical events (Browne et al. 1984; 1986) and economic conditions (Robertson 1983). The current study makes a step forward to empirically verify the occurrence and of minimal winning coalitions in Western Europe by expanding previous research spatially and temporally. Drawing upon the the earlier literature, this study asks the following research question:

RQ1: Have minimal winning coalitions been the most frequent outcomes of government formation in Western Europe?

Along with the above-mentioned research question, the contribution of this work includes the investigation of additional concerns. Specifically, this study asks whether there is geographic and temporal differentiation in the occurrence of minimal winning coalitions across Western Europe. The theoretical framework allows for establishing directional expectations that guide the analysis of the presented research questions. As noted previously, the existing literature has found that the outcomes of government formation in Western Europe have also led to *non-rational* governing solutions. Thus, this study expects that minimal winning coalitions have not been the most frequent outcomes of bargaining (H1). Consistent with Franklin and Mackie (1984), this study also expects geographical differentiation in the patterns of government formation (H1a). West European cabinets differ substantially in their party system structures, suggesting divergent trajectories in the negotiation processes. According to the size principle (Riker 1962), minimal winning coalitions result from a two-person game with complete information. Furthermore, Dodd (1976) posited that minimal winning cabinets tend to form in multi-party systems that are de-fractionalised and not extremely polarised. The analysis expects minimal winning coalitions to occur more often in multi-party systems with two large parties. In such situations, two large parties can conduct highly informed bargaining by limiting other parties' power and forming a grand coalition amongst them (Budge and Keman 1990).

Governments across Europe have faced multiple crises in recent times, leading to increased non-partisans' involvement in ruling positions (Pastorella 2016). Particularly, holding executive posts in times of economic turmoil might be deemed dangerous by political formations and party leaders. The spread of non-partisans in national governments has been analysed by highlighting parties' necessity to preserve their credibility vis-à-vis voters and to dilute responsibility when

treacherous crises occur (Wrátil and Pastorella 2018; Alexiadou and Gunaydin 2019). Economic shocks have also been demonstrated to influence government formation (Robertson 1986) by promoting all pro-system party coalitions (Budge and Keman 1990). Therefore, office-seeking perspectives may be less critical in driving parties' coalition behaviour in times of crisis. Along these lines, this study expects minimal winning coalitions to be less frequent in economically unfavourable periods (H1b).

To sum up, the research hypotheses are as follows:

H1: Minimal winning coalitions are not the most frequent outcomes of the government formation process in Western Europe over the analysed time frame.

H1a: Minimal winning coalitions occur more often in less polarised multi-party systems in which two large parties are willing to form a grand coalition to limit other parties' power.

H1b: Minimal winning coalitions are less frequent than oversized majority governments in economically unfavourable periods.

DESIGN

This study uses an original multilevel dataset of about 700 cabinets and 373 elections in 20 Western European countries from 1945 to 2021. The dataset is based on three different levels: cabinet level, legislature level and country level. Regarding the spatial framework of the analysis, which is examined within the different levels, the countries under investigation are 20, clustered into four geographical areas: Northern Europe, Continental Europe, Southern Europe, and the UK and Ireland. The research focus starts from the end of World War II up to the last governments of 2021. For so-called *late democratisation* countries, such as Spain, Portugal and Greece, the period considered starts from the 1970s. Similar to that in the work of Chiaramonte and Emanuele (2017), the temporal framework is divided into four different periods: the Golden Age (1945–1969), the Pre-Fall of the Berlin Wall (1970–1989), the Post-Fall of the Berlin Wall (1990–2007) and the Great Recession (2008–2021). Comparative empirical tests are performed to verify the study's first expectation. The share of minimal winning coalitions is observed to assess the occurrence of such a cabinet type over the complete time frame and across all the countries examined. The comparative analysis focuses on specific geographical areas and periods characterised by critical junctures to test the second and third expectations. Information on governments' characteristics comes from Sonntag (2015) and Casal Bértoa (2021). Data on governments' parliamentary support are provided by the electoral authorities of each country.

Table 1: Countries and cabinets in the dataset

Country	Area	N cabinets
Austria	Continental	32
Belgium	Continental	48
Cyprus	Southern	23
Denmark	Northern	40
Finland	Northern	62
France	Continental	76
Germany	Continental	23

Country	Area	N cabinets
Greece	Southern	29
Iceland	Northern	36
Ireland	UK and Ireland	30
Italy	Southern	67
Luxembourg	Continental	20
Malta	Southern	22
Netherlands	Continental	30
Norway	Northern	32
Portugal	Southern	24
Spain	Southern	17
Sweden	Northern	31
Switzerland	Continental	26
UK	UK and Ireland	30
Total		698

We now shift our attention to the operationalisation of our focal variable—cabinet type. Four cabinet types are included: minority governments, oversized coalitions, minimal winning coalitions, and single-party majority governments. Two criteria have been followed. The first is the number of parties participating in the government by holding ministerial seats. The second is the parliamentary seat share to establish whether a government has the majority in the parliament. In the case of bicameral systems, the seat share considered is that of the lower house. Cabinet types have the following characteristics:

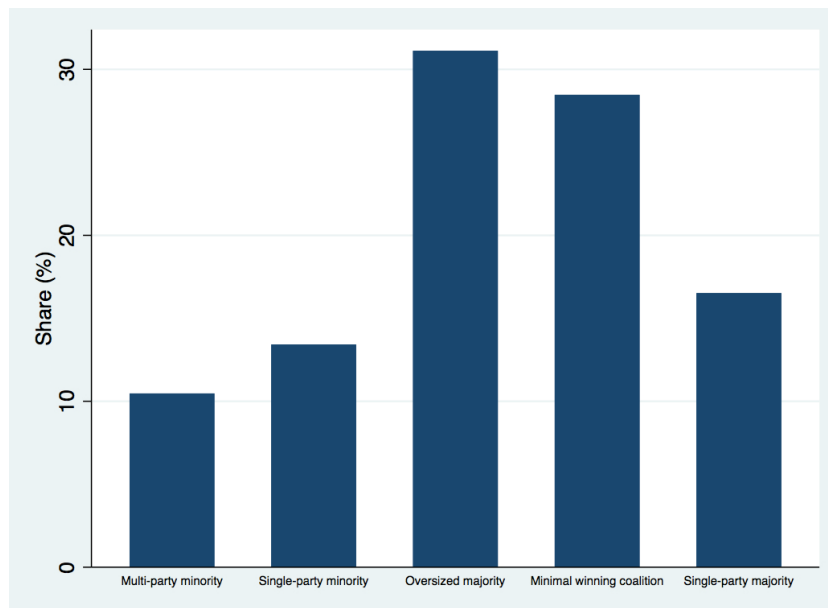
- a) *Minority governments*: One or more parties form the government. The government does not have the majority of seats in the parliament. To survive, the cabinet needs to rely on the external support of other formations.
- b) *Oversized coalitions*: The government includes more parties than the minimal winning formula. Such solutions are labelled the outcome of policy-seeking perspectives (Axelrod, 1970; Mitchell and Nyblade, 2008).
- c) *Minimal winning coalitions*: The government includes the smallest number of parties that together can secure a parliamentary majority for the coalition. Such a coalition is formed when parties are primarily concerned about reaching government positions (Riker, 1962).
- d) *Single-party majority governments*: The government is formed by just one party, which holds the majority of parliamentary seats.

OCCURRENCE OF MINIMAL WINNING COALITIONS

The empirical records of the occurrence of minimal winning coalitions are interesting. Figure 1 shows the share of the focal variable, i.e. cabinet type, over the entire temporal and spatial framework. In the 20 West European countries in the dataset, minimal winning coalitions are the second most frequent coalition type (28.5%). Multi-party minority governments are the least frequent outcomes of coalition formation (10.5%). In terms of single-party governments, the

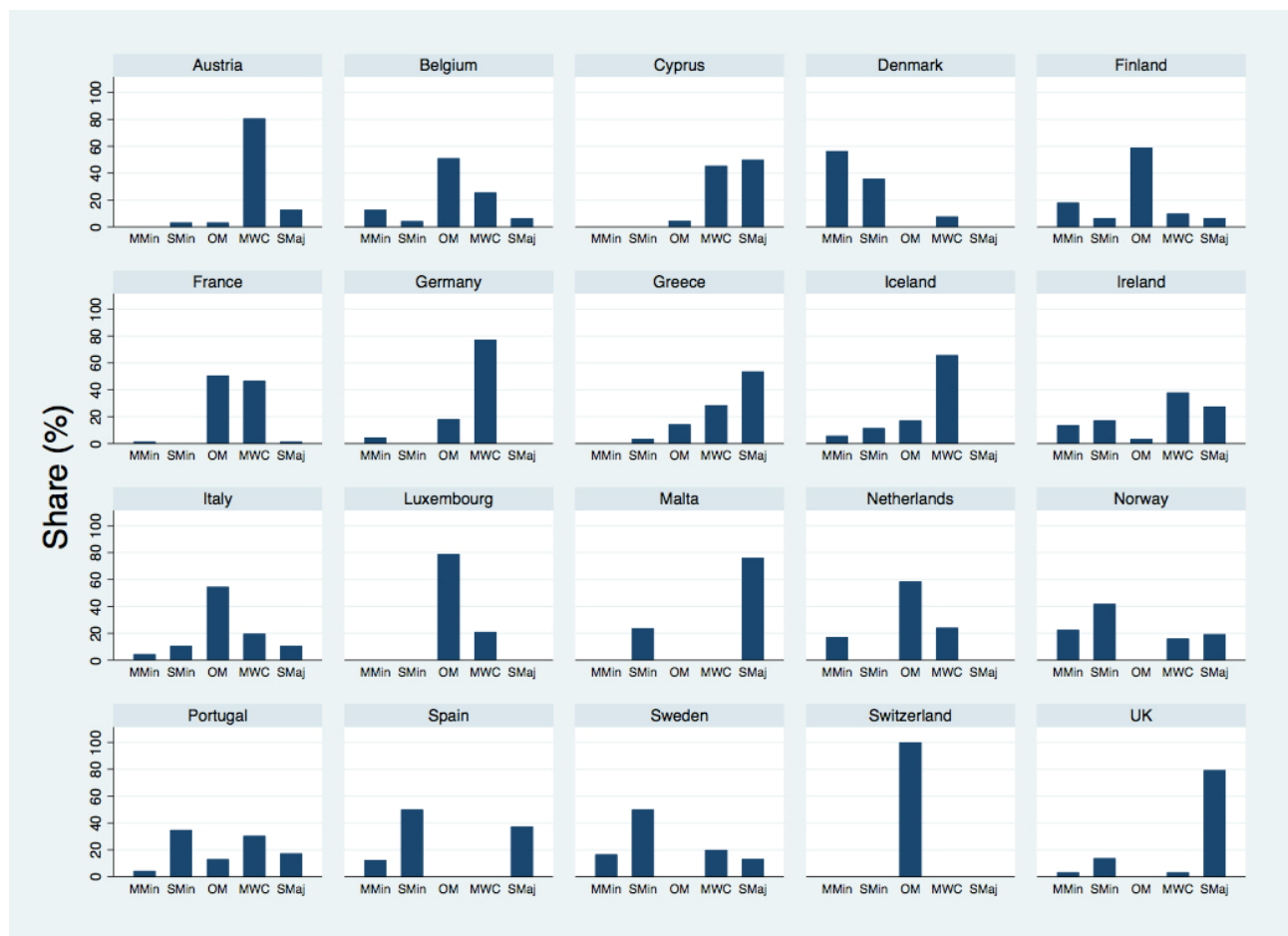
share of single-party majority governments (16.5%) is higher than single-party minority governments (13.4%). Overall, coalition governments account for 70% of all West European governments from 1945 to 2021.

Figure 1: Share (%) of cabinet type in 20 Western European democracies (1945–2021)



Source: Author's elaboration on original data

Most importantly, although the difference between minimal winning coalitions and oversized majority governments is not large, the latter turns out to be the parties' preferred coalition solution (31%) throughout the investigated period. This suggests that West European party behaviour has not been mainly driven by office-seeking considerations, but an important role is played by ideological concerns when dealing with the government formation process (Axelrod 1970). Nevertheless, the difference in the share of minimal winning and oversized coalitions is not remarkable. This indicates that both considerations play a role in the coalition formation process. Interpreting these results from Riker's perspective, this study could argue that the parties failed to obtain complete information during the bargaining. This lack of information led to non-rational solutions (Riker 1962). Consistent with previous literature (Mitchell and Nyblade 2008), the current study has hypothesised a lower frequency of minimal winning coalitions. The presented results confirm H1.

Figure 2: Share (%) of cabinet type in 20 Western European democracies per geographic area

Source: Author's elaboration on original data

After the broader picture of the occurrence of minimal winning coalitions in Western Europe has been observed, further exploring the issue is essential by gauging possible geographical differentiation. Previous studies have shown a swerving pattern, emphasising that parties might pursue a combination of different goals (Strøm and Müller 1999).

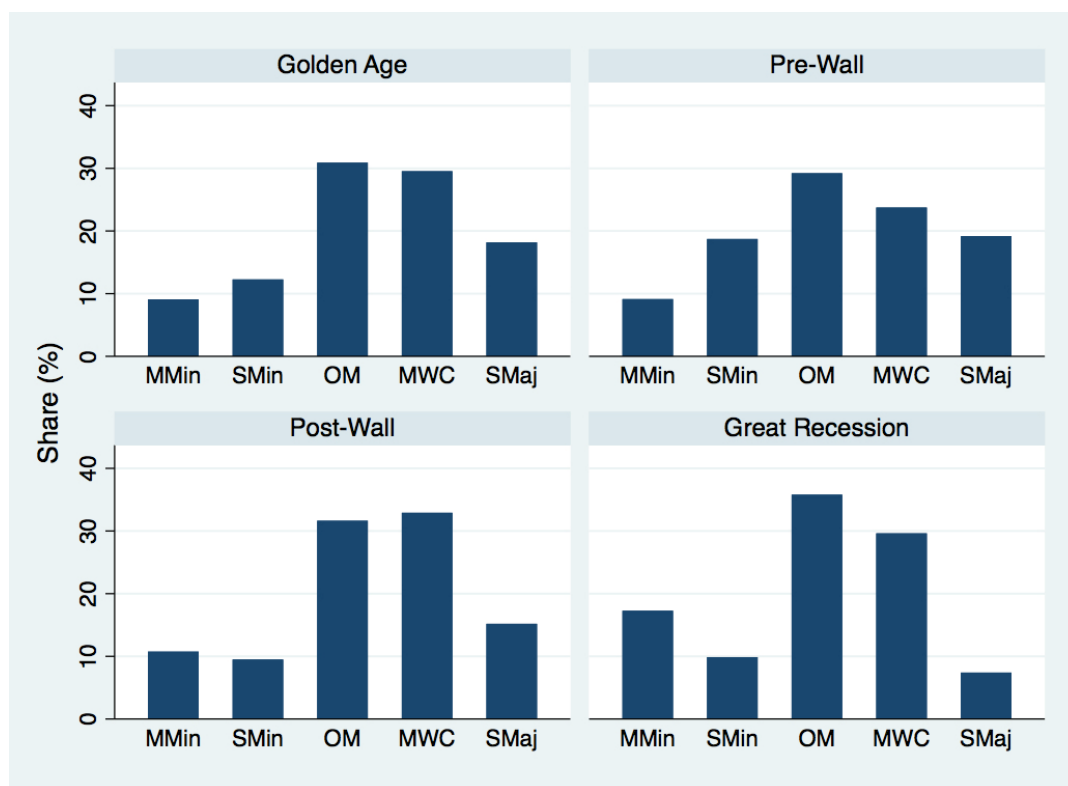
Building on Riker's two-person assumption (1962: 47) and Dodd's proposition (1976), this study expects that minimal winning coalitions should occur more often in less polarised multi-party systems in which two large parties that are willing and able to form either a single-party majority or a grand coalition between them are present, thus limiting other parties' room for manoeuvre. Such a situation is frequent in some specific West European countries. Typically, compared to other European democracies, the Irish party system has always been considered an archetype of the office-seeking model of party behaviour (Marsh and Mitchell 1999). Frequent two-party coalition governments have also been found in Austria (Müller 2000) and Germany (Saalfeld 2002; Schmidt 2008).

Figure 2 shows the share of cabinet type in 20 Western European democracies. The variation amongst countries is considerable. Minimal winning coalitions are the most frequent coalition type in only four countries: Austria, Germany, Iceland and Ireland. In particular, the share of minimal winning governments in Austria and Germany reaches almost 80%, whereas that in Iceland and Ireland stand at 60% and 40%, respectively. Surprisingly, in a quite polarised system, such as France, the share of minimal winning coalitions is even slightly higher than that in Ireland. However, the surplus majority remains the most frequent French coalition type. Minimal winning solutions are also recurrent in Cyprus (45%) and Portugal (30,4%). In the latter

country, other coalition solutions, such as oversized majority governments and multi-party minority governments, comprise 13% and 4% of cabinets, respectively. On the other hand, Figure 2 shows where minimal winning coalitions never occurred. Notably, in three countries, - Malta, Spain and Switzerland - Riker's prediction does not find empirical corroboration. A marginal share is also recorded in Denmark, Finland, and UK. These findings suggest that the two-actor assumption cannot capture the more complex mechanisms underpinning government formation.

While Riker predicted minimal winning coalitions as the most occurring type of government, scholars of parliamentary democracies have already noted that such an outcome was not the norm in most countries (Strøm 1990). In some countries, parties do not adopt office-seeking perspectives. Parties might also be concerned about the potential electoral costs of joining a coalition with rival political formations. They could be reluctant to adopt policy agendas that do not reflect their ideological stances. Alternatively, parties do not have complete information on their counterpart's preferences, thus leading the bargaining to non-optimal outcomes.

Figure 3: Share (%) of cabinet type in 20 Western European democracies per phase



Source: Author's elaboration on original data

So far, the results show that minimal winning coalitions have not been more frequent than oversized majority governments. This finding suggests the (slight) prominence of policy-seeking perspectives over office-seeking approaches and the inadequacy of Riker's proposition. A relevant country differentiation is also confirmed (Franklin and Mackie 1984).

This study's third expectation concerns the presence of temporal variation. Specifically, governmental positions are expected to be less appealing for parties during economic turmoil (Wrátil and Pastorella 2018; Alexiadou and Gunaydin 2019), leading to decreased office-seeking considerations. It has been argued that economic shocks play a role in government formation (Robertson 1986), particularly by enhancing the genesis of all pro-system party coalitions (Budge and Keman 1990). Along this path, the study expects minimal winning coalitions to be less frequent than oversized majority governments in economically unfavourable periods (H1b).

Indeed, to dilute government responsibility in times of crisis, parties might opt to involve non-partisan figures (e.g. Emanuele et al. 2022) or enlarge the coalition's size by including other political formations.

Figure 3 shows the share of cabinet types in 20 West European countries by phase. The first period is the Golden Age, which covers the end of World War II up to 1969. This phase has been characterised by impressive growth in the European economy (Denison 1967; Crafts 1995). The share of minimal winning coalitions and oversized majority executives was almost equal during this period, i.e. around 30% for both coalition types. The Pre-Wall phase refers to the period preceding the Berlin Wall's fall. It is characterised by the outbreak of several economic shocks, including the disruptive 1973 oil crisis. From Figure 3, it is possible to observe that parties' office-seeking behaviour started to decline with the passage from the Golden Age to the Pre-Wall period. In the latter phase, reaching executive positions became less profitable, as displayed by the decreased share of minimal winning coalitions and the augmented rate of single-party minority cabinets.

Overall, Riker's and Dodd's propositions are not empirically confirmed. Despite a high degree of sophistication, game theoretic approaches to cabinets' investigation fail to effectively explain phenomena underpinning government formation. While forming a single-party majority seems to be the *magic formula* for a long-lasting cabinet (e.g. Saalfeld 2008), the recent challenges that West European parties face may undermine the possibility of forming such government types. Consequently, parties frequently need to manage different trade-offs when dealing with (often complex) bargaining. Single-party majority governments comprise just 16.5% of executives in Western Europe in the investigated time frame. In this scenario, the parties are relentlessly required to make difficult decisions. Interestingly, the findings suggest the prominence of Abbott Lawrence Lowell's (1896) propositions rather than those of Riker and Dodd. In his *Governments and Parties in Continental Europe*, Lowell (1896: 73-74) argued that 'the parliamentary system will give a country strong and efficient government only if the majority consists of a single party'. Some years later, Lowell's thesis was reflected in Jean Blondel's (1969) work on comparative government. According to Blondel (1969: 342), a one-party government is the factor contributing most decisively to the stability of governments.

CONCLUSION

This study took a preliminary look at some of the oldest predictions in theorising about the occurrence of coalition governments, i.e. the minimal winning criterion. Accordingly, minimal winning governments should be formed with greater likelihood than other government types because they grant a higher life expectancy. The study also investigated how economic context conditions might influence this relationship, expecting fewer minimal winning coalitions in periods of economic hardship. Using an original dataset, this research aimed to explore the assumptions of two main theories in government formation, updating previous studies by expanding both temporal and spatial frameworks.

Consistent with recent literature, the analysis found that minimal winning coalitions have not been more frequent than oversized majority cabinets throughout the time span considered. Notably, the difference between the share of the two coalitions' occurrence increases during times of economic turmoil. During economically prosperous periods, i.e. the Golden Age and the period after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the discrepancy between policy-seeking and office-seeking outcomes has been marginal. Conversely, during unfavourable periods, i.e. the Pre-fall of the Berlin Wall and the Great Recession, an increase in oversized majority governments' share, to the detriment of minimal winning coalitions, is observed. This suggests that office-seeking perspectives alone are not sufficient to determine the type of government formed after the election. Instead, there is a combination of policy-seeking and office-holding goals, indicating that both considerations come into play during government formation. Whether one goal is more

important than the other is a complex issue, and this study offers a preliminary descriptive glance.

Nevertheless, the study is unable to address the entirety of scholarly effort on government formation and duration. It should be noted that considerable work on such matters has been done recently (e.g. Bergman et al. 2021). On the one hand, the literature on government formation has deeply investigated the type of government formed by proposing new analytical frameworks and focusing on the portfolio allocation process, updating the analysis of *who gets what* beyond *who gets in* (Bergman et al. 2021). On the other hand, novel developments in the field of government stability have shed light on the tremendous impact exerted by factors that do not belong to cabinets' structures (Walther and Hellström 2019).

Overall, enduring government configurations are struggling to emerge from the bargaining process in Europe. This potentially damaging convergence seems to make room for instability at the systemic level. In these circumstances, potential ruling parties are dramatically challenged, as they need to establish compromise and agreements with other parties while maintaining credibility vis-à-vis their constituencies and remaining ideologically consistent. In Europe, some parties found enduring solutions to this problem, e.g. the magic formula in Switzerland. By contrast, Italian parties were unable to solve frequent intracoalitional conflicts, increasing the Italian government's instability (Improta 2022). In terms of future paths, the outbreak of new challenger parties in legislatures would not make life easier for present and future *formateurs*, as their anti-establishment stands make them partners that are difficult to negotiate with. Furthermore, coalition governments are becoming the rule of European politics so much so that even majoritarian political systems, such as that of the UK, have formed the first coalition government since 1945 (the 2015 Cameron–Clegg coalition). Therefore, the only answer to the problem of instability in a Europe that lacks stable ruling solutions is greater inter-party cooperation in government coalitions.

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Book Review

Research Handbook on the Politics of EU Law

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Abstract

The *Research Handbook on the Politics of EU Law* makes a significant contribution to European Integration literature. Covering a range of topics from EU institutional order, to EU system of governance, as well as substantive areas of EU policy where law and politics meet, complement and, sometimes, conflict. This is a multi-dimensional book and a useful reference guide for both legal academics, political scientists, and scholars from other disciplines who have a strong interest in the EU's political integration through law.

Keywords

EU politics; EU law; European integration; Human rights; Freedom of movement

European integration has not just been an economic, but also a normative process to realise political aims through legal instruments. Art.2 of the Treaty of the European (TEU) underlines the “respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law, and the respect for human rights, including rights of persons belonging to minorities”. However, European integration has been challenged on numerous grounds today with democracy, fundamental values and rule of law at the centre of the debates. Therefore, the *Research Handbook on the Politics of EU law* (the *Research Handbook*) is a timely contribution to the limited but significant area of European integration literature covering substantive analysis of where law and politics meet and complement each other. In this respect, the book addresses several issues which feed into different dimensions of the EU integration process and reflects on how recent crises have impacted on law and policy-making in the EU.

There are two main parts to the *Research Handbook*. The first part deals with theory and practice of EU governance as the meeting place between EU law, EU politics and EU institutions. As regards EU institutions it analyses how these evolved throughout the EU's history, including their respective roles in European integration, how they relate to each other, interact with each other, and interact with other bodies such as NGOs or private companies. In this part, the analysis highlights on the use of direct democracy such as referenda and the European Citizens' Initiative (ECI), including the new ECI regulation and sheds light on significant developments in this area, post-Lisbon.

The second part of the book examines the specific policy fields in which the EU has been particularly active, such as free movement, gender equality, citizenship, anti-discrimination rules, and where there is clear interaction between politics and law, both in the historical and in the contemporary context. In this part, Heindlmaier and Blauburger explore in Chapter 10 how the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU) has contributed to political decision-making on free movement law (2020, 163-180). The analysis explains CJEU judges' changing attitudes over time, the empowerment of the Court, the limits to its political power and Member States' reactions to its judicial activism. In Chapter 11, the judicial governance of EU anti-discrimination law and the development of anti-discrimination as a core principle of EU law is analysed by Frese (2020, 181-203). Then in Chapter 12 Tryfonidou navigates through the political minefield that is the law and politics of sexual minority rights in the EU (2020, 204-223). The chapter provides us with the recent developments in the field revealing the resistance of some Member States to protect or even recognise the LGBTQ rights and also the CJEU's rather reserved manner in its rulings related to the enforcement of such rights. Chapter 13 by Polomarkakis, explores certain key hurdles to progress in his analysis of Social Europe, such as: the dubious success of informal governance, mainly through Open Method of Co-ordination (OMC) and the paradigm of flexicurity; the considerable influence exerted by Member States as powerful stakeholders in the EU's multi-levelled governance system; and the inherently economic orientation of the Treaties and the European project more generally. Polomarkakis explanations of the role of the OMC as an informal governance tool, the competence issue, and the handling of the global and financial crises by the EU are likely to be informative for EU law experts who are perhaps less familiar with EU politics (2020, 224-245).

The political dynamics of EU human rights law is analysed by Granger in Chapter 14. Beginning with a brief presentation of the EU human rights law regime and its specific features, Granger goes on to successfully develop an argument calling for a more interdisciplinary research agenda, inspired by scholarship on European integration and legal mobilisation which helps anticipate its future evolution (2020, 246-280). Following this, Zahn elaborates on the politics of European labour law, in Chapter 15, reminding us of the CJEU's judgements in *Viking* and *Laval* and the proposed 'Protocol on Social Progress' in order to clarify the relationship between fundamental rights and economic freedoms (2020, 281-299). Another contribution comes from Borg-Barthet, who provides analysis of a rather neglected area, namely, the mutual recognition of companies within corporate law

and free movement rules in the EU. Writing in Chapter 16, Borg-Barthet revisits the CJEU's *Centros* ruling and the subsequent related decisions and, in so doing, underlines certain unresolved problems in this area (2020, 300-319). Chapter 17 by Herlin-Karnell touches on the Area of Freedom, Security and Justice (AFSJ), which is an important field for the interaction of politics and law. Whilst asylum, immigration and civil law cooperation were brought into the first pillar of EU competences by the Treaty of Amsterdam in 1999, criminal law cooperation and security remained in the third pillar until the entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty in 2009. Therefore, the political dimension has always been dominant in this area, as evidenced clearly during the Syrian refugee crisis. Herlin-Karnell analyses the issue from a trust and mutual recognition perspective and makes significant predictions about the functioning of the AFSJ policy in the future (2020, 320-334). Chapter 18 entitled "The unintended consequences of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) for local communities" (335-356) focuses on the EU's agriculture-related policies (i.e., CAP) with a secondary focus on animal welfare and food safety. The authors used the case study of the Greek Island of Ikaria "to illustrate the ways in which the law and politics of the EU intertwine and translate into unintended consequences such as environmental degradation and the erosion of traditional practices, leading to loss of community cohesion." (2020; 335). Dickons' chapter 19 on the politics of EU migration law provides us with the overview of EU migration law and policy a useful categorisation of specific migration types shaped by the different policy priorities of the EU (2020, 357-374). Finally, in Chapter 20, Fahey takes the EU's International Relations (IR) law as the context and provides a critical analysis for a future research agenda (2020, 375-387). According to the author, EU IR law has long been a highly doctrinal subject, dominated by highly court-centric views on EU integration and with the new type of trade agreements in the post-Lisbon era, the EU IR law will become increasingly difficult to litigate and increasingly unpredictable in respect to outcomes (387).

To conclude, *The Research Handbook on the Politics of EU law* is a valuable and highly commendable source of information on many cross-cutting issues – including migration, human rights, free movement, international relations and governance – where law and politics meet in the EU context. The book reflects the interplay and tensions between legal requirements and political goals. In this respect, it is an excellent reference book not only for lawyers whose knowledge on the EU politics is limited but also for those interested in the EU from all disciplines.

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

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