EUROPEAN POLICY ANALYSIS

Cooperation in the Council of the EU: Explaining network relations among member states

Markus Johansson, Olof Larsson, Rutger Lindahl and Daniel Naurin*

Summary

Reaching agreements in the Council of the European Union (EU), the key legislative EU institution besides the European Parliament, requires that member states cooperate with each other. But which member states form stronger cooperative ties, and why? This European Policy Analysis responds to this question using survey data in which member state representatives to the Council point out their cooperation partners.

The survey underlying the analysis has been conducted triennially since 2003, and this analysis uses data from the latest three rounds – 2015, 2018 and 2021 – and provides the first analyses of the 2021 survey. The 2021 survey confirms earlier findings that member state relations are stable over time and that cooperation tends to be stronger between neighbouring states. Germany and France remain the most frequent cooperation partners to others, but have, after Brexit, formed a top trio including the Netherlands as well.

The analysis also reveals that cooperative relations are stronger between states with similar politico-economic systems, and that governments' ideological similarity on the Green-Alternative-Libertarian/Traditional-Authoritarian-Nationalist and European integration dimensions has grown in importance. Larger states are also more frequently mentioned as cooperation partners to others, while there is no such effect for holding the Council presidency or being part of the Economic and Monetary Union.

* *Markus Johansson* is a researcher in political science and deputy director at the Centre for European Research at the University of Gothenburg (CERGU), and a senior researcher in political science at the Swedish Institute for European Policy Studies (SIEPS). *Olof Larsson* is a researcher in political science at the University of Gothenburg. *Rutger Lindahl* is Professor Emeritus in political science at the University of Gothenburg. *Daniel Naurin* is Professor in political science at the University of Oslo and Gothenburg and Director of ARENA Centre for European Studies, University of Oslo.

The opinions expressed in the publication are those of the authors.

1. Introduction

Coalition building and cooperative relations are key factors in political decision-making, both when it comes to enabling compromises and to shaping their policy content. This is not least the case in political systems governed by majoritarian procedures, such as the Council of the European Union (EU), where qualified majority voting has replaced unanimity as the decision-making rule for most policy areas. In the Council, representatives of member state governments take part in decision-making at both ministerial and preparatory levels, and in that capacity need to build cooperative relations with each other. But how are these relations formed, and what are the explanations for why some member states develop stronger cooperative relations than others?

In this analysis, we evaluate this question using survey data on the member states' cooperative relations, which we have gathered every three years between 2003 and 2021 (further described below). Based on these data, we here analyse the patterns and explanations for these relations, focusing both on the pairwise relations between member states but also which states are the most frequent cooperation partners to others, which we refer to as the member states' *network capital* (see also Johansson, Naurin and Lindahl, 2019; Naurin and Lindahl, 2014).

In a first part of our analysis, we explore how network relations have developed in the latest survey round 2021 compared to earlier rounds and show that member state cooperative relations, overall, continue to show stability and that they are geographically structured. However, we also note that the UK's departure from the EU has left a void at the top beside Germany and France when ranking member states according to their network capital, a space that has now been filled by the Netherlands. Second, we delve deeper into the question of what explains the network relations we observe. In particular, we evaluate the effect of having similar politico-economic systems in the member states and government ideology, but also the effects of holding the institutionally central presidency of the Council, member state size, as well as following up on earlier analyses of being outside of the Economic and Monetary Union (EMU).

The empirical analysis uses the three latest survey rounds (2015, 2018 and 2021), based on which we show that similarity in terms of politico-economic systems explains member states' cooperation, and that ideological similarity has become more important over time, in particular as structured by the more culturally oriented Green-Alternative-Libertarian and Traditional-Authoritarian-Nationalist (GAL-TAN) dimension and positions on European integration. We also show that the size of the member states affects their network capital, but we observe no positive effect for Council presidency or being part of the EMU.

2. Data on network capital and cooperative relations

Since 2003, the project *Negotiations in the Council of the European Union (NCEU)* has gathered survey data every three years on cooperation and negotiations in the Council of the EU. The latest survey was done in the fall of 2021. The survey respondents are all member state representatives to a sample of eleven Council working parties and committees, covering both senior committees such as the Committee of Permanent Representatives (COREPER) and lower level working parties, as well as a range of policy areas.[1] In each survey round, the aim has been to get one representative per member state in each group to respond. In the 2021 survey, this resulted in a sample group of respondents consisting of 297 persons, from which we got a response rate of 75%, which is quite high, yet slightly lower than the average from earlier rounds, which had been 81% (Johansson *et al.*, 2023). The respondents were contacted by e-mail and the survey questions were asked in interviews that are done by phone.

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[1] The sample of groups covered has only experienced minor variations over the years. In 2021, the sample consisted of COREPER 1, COREPER 2, Political Security Committee (PSC), Special Committee on Agriculture (SCA), Economic Policy Committee (EPC), Politico-Military Group (PMG), Working Party on Tax Questions, Coordinating committee in the area of police and judicial cooperation in criminal matters (CATS), Working party of chief veterinary officers, Working Party on Competitiveness and Growth and Working party on the Environment.

Each survey has had its unique setup of questions, but one question has been included in all rounds, asking the respondents about their cooperative relations with other member states. The question asks: *Which member states do you most often cooperate with within your working group/committee in order to develop a common position?* Based on the member states that they mention, we assign scores in descending order, starting with 10 points if a member state is mentioned first, 9 points if it is mentioned second, and so on. To account for the fact that some respondents mention a larger number of member states than others, we then standardize the scores for each respondent to become the share of scores given by each respondent. In effect, this means that each respondent is given equal weight in the analysis, regardless of how many other member states they mention, and it also makes the data comparable across the different survey rounds.

> "Having high network capital – that is, being a member state that others point to as a frequent cooperation partner – can also provide opportunities to influence policy outcomes."

Based on the responses to this question, we have been able to study the network of member state relations in the Council, as well as the strength of cooperative ties (e.g. Huhe, Naurin and Thomson, 2017, 2020; Johansson, 2021). In previous analyses, we have often used the aggregated cooperation scores for the different member states as a measure of what we call the member states' *network capital* (e.g. Johansson, Naurin and Lindahl, 2019; Naurin and Lindahl, 2008, 2010, 2014). Having high network capital – that is, being a member state that others point to as a frequent cooperation partner – can also provide opportunities to influence policy outcomes. Few and weak cooperative ties, on the contrary, provide less ground for influence. We therefore consider network capital to be an important and valuable asset in the endeavour to shape policy content, although this is not an automatic process.

The data from the earlier survey rounds up until 2018 have been extensively analysed over the years, and the results have been presented in numerous publications.[2] In this analysis, we update the earlier findings by also including data from the 2021 survey round. This survey was conducted in a period when the Council was returning to normal operations after the COVID-19 pandemic and before the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and represents the latest findings about member states' cooperative relations. When analysing the explanations for the network relations we observe, we include data from the three latest survey rounds – 2015, 2018 and 2021. This means that we cover the periods before (2015), during (2018) and after (2021) Brexit.

3. The stability of member states' network capital

In earlier analyses, we have demonstrated that member states' cooperative relations and network capital are stable over time and that member states thus remain committed to established relations. These relations are, in turn, to some extent formed on a geographical basis, which means that neighbouring member states tend to cooperate more closely. This results in what we have previously described as a north-south-east pattern of cooperation (e.g. Johansson, Naurin and Lindahl, 2019; Naurin and Lindahl 2008). The same general patterns are evident in the 2021 data. In Figure 1, we show the pattern of network relations between the EU member states in 2021, where each member state is represented by a dot. The figure can be viewed as an illustration of the overall patterns of cooperative relations, where the distances between the member states indicate the strength of their cooperation. The relations between individual member states should, however, be interpreted with caution. This mapping should mainly be used to read how groups of member states are related to each other. What is evident in the plot is that the same rough pattern of geographical cooperation continues to be visible, and that there is a north European group at the top of the figure, a south European group at the bottom and an eastern group of states in the left part.

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[2] See Naurin *et al.* (2022) for detailed information about the data and an updated publications list.

Figure 1. **Pattern of network relations, 2021**
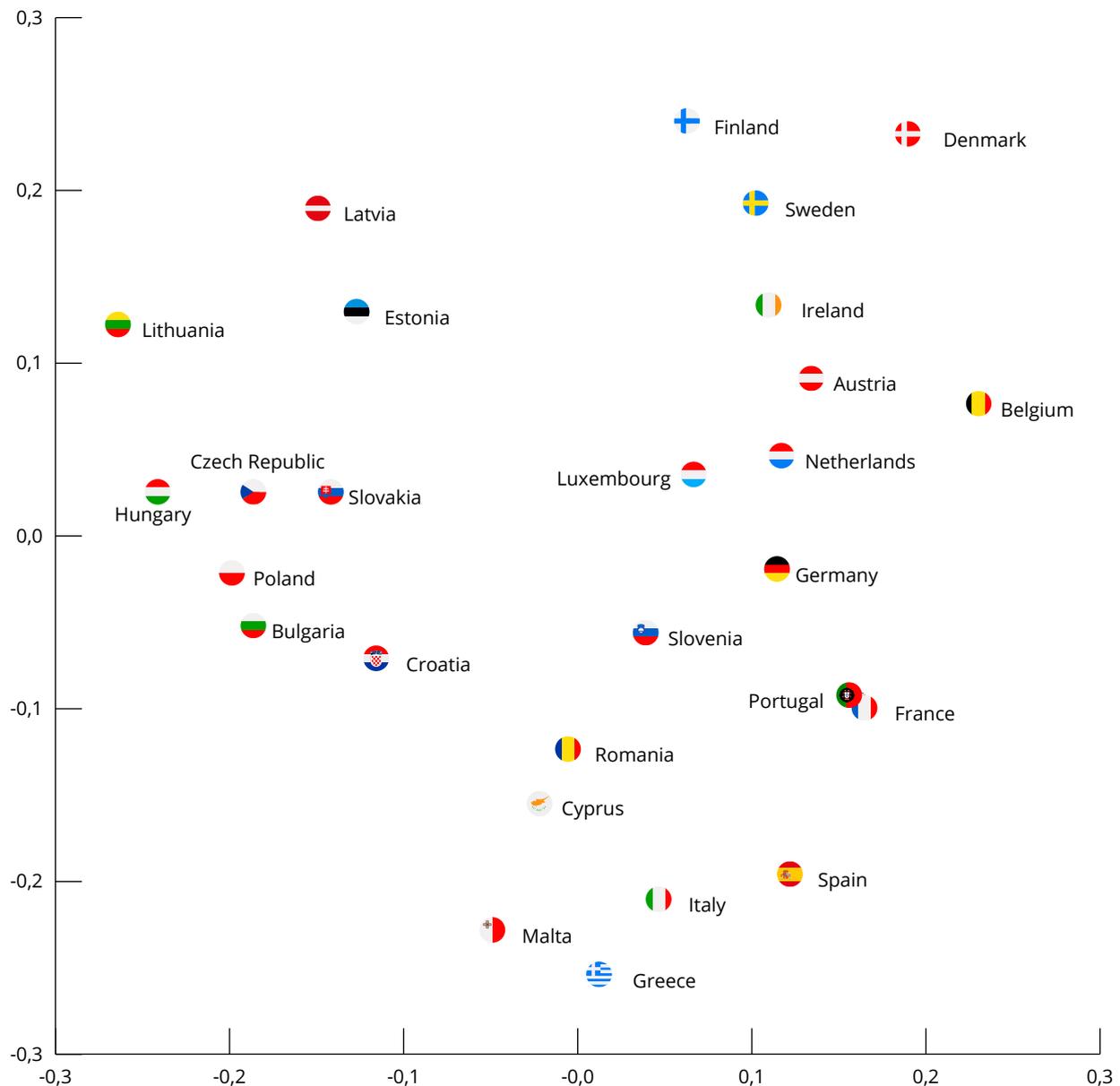
Note: The plotting of states is done using multidimensional scaling (MDS) technique. Based on the survey question: *Which member states do you most often cooperate with within your working group/committee in order to develop a common position?*

Besides the relations between states, we also study the member states' *network capital* – that is, the aggregated cooperation scores for each member state. Since the first survey was done in 2003, the trio Germany, France and the UK has stood out for its high network capital and ranked as the top three member states in all rounds. This stability changed after the referendum over Brexit in 2016, and the UK lost half its network capital between the survey rounds in 2015 and 2018, and in 2018 was placed in the middle of the ranking. Because the UK left the EU in 2020, it was not included in the 2021 survey.

The effect of the UK's departure from the EU for member state relations has been extensively studied using the survey data up until 2018 (Huhe, Naurin and Thomson, 2017, 2020; Johansson, 2021). One question that was raised in the aftermath of Brexit was whether any other member state

Figure 2. **Member state network capital in 2015, 2018 and 2021**
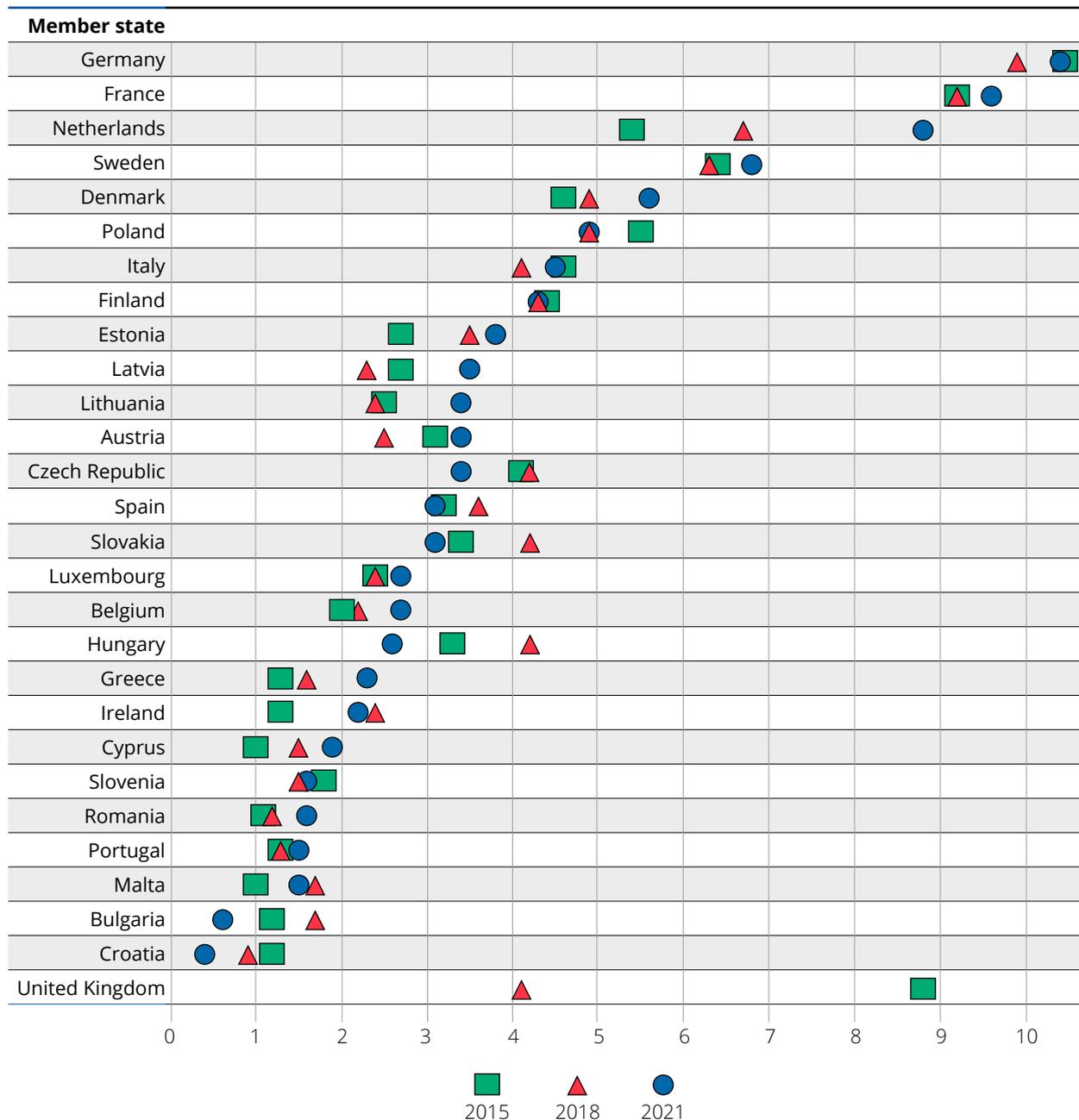
Note: Based on the survey question: *Which member states do you most often cooperate with within your working group/committee in order to develop a common position?* The scores are standardized to a share of scores for each survey round, which are displayed on the x-axis. The UK was not included in the 2021 survey round.

would replace the UK alongside Germany and France at the top of the ranking; both Italy and Poland were mentioned as possible successors (see e.g. Johansson, Naurin and Lindahl, 2019). The member states' network capital over the last three survey rounds, in the order of the 2021 ranking, is illustrated in Figure 2.

It is evident from this ranking and the amount of network capital possessed by the different member states, that the Netherlands has replaced the UK at the top alongside Germany and France, ending up third in the ranking of member states both in 2018 and 2021. In 2021, these three member states form a distinguishable top trio, with a clear

distance from the member states placed below in the ranking. The trajectory for the Netherlands also provides a contrast to the stability of the member states' network capital that we have previously observed and shows that network capital can change significantly over the course of some years. The Netherlands is the member state whose network capital increased the most between both 2015 and 2018 and between 2018 and 2021. Since 2015, it has increased by 63%, from a share of scores of 5.4% in 2015 to 8.8% in 2021. At the other end of the spectrum, between 2015 and 2018 the UK had the largest decrease in their network capital (by 53%), while Hungary had the largest decrease between 2018 and 2021 (by 38%). Despite these movements, the network capital for each member state was strongly correlated between the different survey rounds, and the period from 2018 to 2021 does not break that pattern.[3]

4. What affects network capital and member states' cooperative relations?

With these updated figures on network capital and cooperative relations as a backdrop, we can proceed to analyse explanations for why some member states have stronger cooperative relations than others. In the survey conducted in 2018, we directly asked the respondents what factors are important for the choice of cooperation partners. We asked about six factors specifically, and the responses were given on a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 means that the factor is of no importance at all, and 5 means that it is of great importance. The first factor was the *common interests* in the specific issue at hand, which is a baseline for any political cooperation. The second was *member state size*, as size determines the voting weight of the member states in the Council and, as such, can make a member state more attractive to cooperate with. The third factor was *political-ideological proximity* – that is, the ideological similarity between the governments, around which political cooperation is often structured. The fourth factor was *support for the European integration*, which can be understood as another ideological dimension (see further below). The fifth was member states' reputation for

implementation efficiency, which indicates whether member states are loyal to cooperation by adopting necessary domestic measures to follow EU law. The sixth factor was the *personal relationship* with the other member state's representatives, which captures the more social aspects of negotiations. The share of responses, but also the balance between positive (4 and 5) and negative (1 and 2) responses, is displayed for each factor in Table 1.

Table 1 shows what the member state representatives themselves believe is important for building cooperative relations. It should be noted that these self-reported reasons for cooperation might be guided by false impressions due to wishful thinking or appropriateness bias. However, with this caveat, it is clear that the respondents point out common interests as the most important reason for the choice of cooperative relations. It is quite logical that negotiators are driven by the desire to find solutions that satisfy their own interests (Fisher, Ury and Patton, 1999), and hence seek cooperation partners with similar interests as they seek to formulate common positions. The low appreciation of the importance of political-ideological proximity is, in that light, interesting, as it suggests that there are other things that form the basis for common interests.

The only factor apart from common interests in the specific issue at hand where more respondents say that it is important (responses 4 and 5) than who say it is not important (responses 1 and 2) is the personal relationship with the other member state representatives. It is, however, clearly secondary to having common interests. The size of the member state, the member state's support for European integration and the member state's reputation for implementation efficiency are all considered to be less important factors. For these factors, it is also noticeable that around a third of the respondents indicated that the factor is neither important nor unimportant (3 on the scale).

4.1 Data construction
To further test the explanations for cooperative relations, we outline a number of expectations

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[3] The correlation coefficients vary between 0.91 (between the rounds in 2015 and 2018) and 0.98 (between 2003 and 2006). The low correlation coefficient between 2015 and 2018 is primarily due to the UK's drop after the Brexit referendum. The correlation coefficient for 2018 and 2021 is 0.95.

Table 1. **Self-reported reasons for choice of cooperation partners**

	No importance at all				Great importance	Balance
	1	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	
Common interests	1	0	2	24	73	96
Member state size	17	22	31	26	3	-10
Political-ideological proximity	12	27	28	24	8	-7
Support for European integration	16	23	29	23	9	-7
Implementation efficiency	10	27	31	25	7	-5
Personal relationship	6	15	34	33	12	24

Note: Question asked in 2018, using the following formulation: *We would like you to evaluate six factors which may or may not be of importance for your choice of cooperation partners within your working group.* The scale ranges from 1 to 5, where 5 means 'Of great importance' and 1 means 'Of no importance at all'. The numbers indicate percentage of respondents (N = 250), and the balance as the difference between responses 4–5 and 1–2.

derived from earlier studies and literature that are tested in a regression analysis on the network relations in the Council. In the network of cooperative relations analysed here, each member state has an incoming and an outgoing tie to each of the other member states. These ties can, in turn, vary in strength and need not be mutual. To take an example, in 2021, the Swedish representatives indicated a rather weak, yet existing, network relation to their Spanish counterparts (amounting to 2% of the total network scores delivered by Sweden), while no Spanish representative mentioned Sweden as a cooperation partner. These ties (from Sweden to Spain and vice versa) count as two observations in the analysis below. In an EU of 28 member states (pre-Brexit), this means that there are 756 ties to analyse. Because the survey round in 2021 was conducted after the UK had left the EU, this round includes 702 network ties. The explanatory factors for the strength of cooperative relations are tested on the data from the latest three survey rounds – 2015, 2018 and 2021 – which means that there are, in total, 2,214 network ties to analyse.

With this data construction it is possible to analyse explanatory variables that measure how similar two member states are on some given factor. This builds on what can be described as a homophily mechanism, which is common in network analysis

(e.g. Grund and Densley, 2012), where similarity is generally expected to lead to stronger network ties. The data construction allows us, however, to test not only the effect of variables measuring similarity, but also variables that can explain the strength of only the incoming network ties, and hence why some states have more network capital than others.

4.2 Expected explanations for cooperative relations

The member state representatives considered common interests to be an important ground for establishing cooperative relations, but what are these common interests based on? We explore two grounds for common interests between EU member states in the Council, where similarity is expected to strengthen the network tie. The first is structurally determined and draws on the literature on different politico-economic systems of states or 'varieties of capitalism' (e.g. Hall and Soskice, 2001). This literature separates between state systems with more intervention in the domestic economy, called social or coordinated models of capitalism, and systems with less intervention, called liberal models of capitalism. While capitalist models can change over time – depending, for instance, on the political forces in power in the states – they tend to do so slowly (Hall and Soskice, 2003). When the member states are to make decisions in the EU, they typically want adjustment

costs that are as small as possible, and therefore advocate for setting up rules and systems that mimic their national rules and systems as much as possible; this is often referred to as uploading (Börzel, 2002). We therefore test whether states with more similar models tend to seek cooperation to a larger extent than those with more dissimilar models.

The literature on these differences identifies several factors that characterize the different politico-economic state systems (Höpner and Schäfer, 2012). In our own earlier studies, we have delimited these to a matter of taxation, social spending and labour market coordination, showing how these factors affect the member states' conflict and cooperation over European integration (Larsson and Naurin, 2019; Johansson and Larsson, forthcoming), including their network ties based on survey data from 2015 and 2018 (Johansson, 2021). We test whether similarity of politico-economic systems remains an explanation for the network relations of the member states when including the data from 2021. To capture the character of different systems, we use a combined measure (using principal component analysis) of taxation and social spending as share of GDP from Eurostat and collective bargaining coverage from OECD. We use the figures from the year of the survey, but for collective bargaining coverage, data are missing for a few member states and years, and figures have then been imputed based on the closest available year.

Another source of common interests can be government ideology, as governments seek to advance those EU solutions which will support their domestic ideological projects (cf. Garrett, 1992). We therefore include a measurement for the ideological proximity of the member state governments based on the ideological positions of the parties in government at the time of the survey. Government ideology can be captured on different dimensions, where the traditional economic left–right dimension has been complemented by a cultural or identity based dimension, separating between GAL-TAN positions (Hooghe and Marks, 2009). This has also been separated from specific positions on European integration, although they often align (Costello, Thomassen and Rosema, 2012). We include this although the representatives themselves do not consider this to be as important,

because it has been shown in earlier analyses that GAL-TAN and European integration positions explained cooperative relations in the 2018 survey round but not in 2015 (Johansson, 2021). We here evaluate how these results fare when including data from the 2021 survey as well. The ideological positions of the parties in government are identified using the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES) of party positions for the closest available year to the survey (Jolly *et al.*, 2022), and in case of coalition governments, weighted depending on the size of the party in government.

> "[…] the personal relationships between member state representatives in the Council are perceived to be important, and the Council presidency can offer an opportunity to establish and improve personal relationships, thus leading to stronger incoming network ties […]."

Apart from measures of member states' politico-economic systems and government ideology, we also analyse a few factors that can explain the strength of the incoming ties to each member state (their network capital). The first factor we consider is the effect of holding the Council presidency. The rotating Council presidency is often seen as an opportunity for the member states to affect the course of EU decision-making. First, this can be done by utilizing the powers that come with the institutionally central position, not least in terms of steering the Council agenda (Tallberg, 2003), which might be particularly important during the final stages of negotiations (Warntjen, 2008). In addition, the presidency is an important communication hub through which the other member states need to channel their positions, and the presidency's role in navigating the divergencies among the member states – and acting as an entrepreneur of compromise – can increase other member states' propensity to establish cooperative relations with the presidency (cf. Vaznonytė, 2022). Second, the presidency role offers an opportunity to talk to member state delegations with which one normally does not cooperate, and the six-month

Table 2. **List of member states holding the Council presidency at each survey round**

Survey period	Presidency	Presidency past term	Presidency two terms back	Presidency three terms back
Fall 2015	Luxembourg	Latvia	Italy	Greece
Spring 2018	Bulgaria	Estonia	Malta	Slovakia
Fall 2021	Slovenia	Portugal	Germany	Croatia

term can thus be used to build up relations that last beyond the presidency. As observed above, the personal relationships between member state representatives in the Council are perceived to be important, and the Council presidency can offer an opportunity to establish and improve personal relationships, thus leading to stronger incoming network ties (greater network capital).

We expect that holding the presidency is itself likely to lead to more and stronger cooperative relations. At the same time, given the presidency's strong norm of being an honest broker (Elgström, 2003), the presidency period might not be the best time to establish cooperative relations with the purpose of developing common positions, and it might therefore be that the strengthening of personal relations has a delayed effect, and is noticeable only after the presidency is concluded. This was, for instance, expressed as an expectation by the Swedish minister for EU affairs, Jessika Roswall, during the Swedish presidency in the spring 2023 (Sieps podcast 2023). A second expectation is therefore that the member states that have recently held the presidency are likely to have stronger incoming network ties (greater network capital) than they would otherwise have. We explore this possible effect for the member states that held the presidency the term before the time for the survey, two terms from the time of the survey and three terms from the time of the survey (see Table 2 for the list of presidencies for each survey round).

Another aspect of holding the presidency is that they are now coordinated in so-called trios (Vaznonytė, 2022). The trios consist of member states that hold three consecutive presidencies, and they coordinate their work by, for instance, agreeing on a trio programme for the entire 18-month period. The trio construction allows the included member states to establish a more formalized cooperation, which has the potential to strengthen the personal relations between

the representatives of the three member states, even in periods when the trio is not in charge of the presidency. At the same time, the trios are composed to include different types of member states that vary in size, length of membership and geographical location (European Council Decision 2009/881/EU), and this heterogeneity might undermine cooperative relations. We therefore test whether there is an effect of belonging to the same trio presidency.

The member state representatives themselves do not consider the size of other member states to be an important factor when establishing cooperative relations, although population size determines the voting weight for each member state. Yet, it has often been argued that member state size and formal powers do matter for decision-making in the EU (e.g. Dür and Mateo, 2010; Börzel, 2021). An indication that member state size is important to explain the strength of cooperative relations is given in Figure 2 above, where there is a pattern of larger member states being placed higher up in the ranking (see also Johansson *et al.*, 2023). We therefore include member state size, as measured by population, as an explanatory factor for the incoming ties (network capital).

"Our conclusion thus far has been that member states that have not joined the EMU do not have lower network capital than other member states."

Finally, we have previously analysed the effect of being a member state that is not part of the Economic and Monetary Union (EMU) and hence has not adopted the common currency. Some have argued that differentiated integration in this important area might create a core and periphery of member states, where the outsiders would lose in terms of network and cooperation in areas that

are not part of the EMU (Jerneck, 2014). Our conclusion thus far has been that member states that have not joined the EMU do not have lower network capital than other member states (Naurin and Lindahl, 2010, 2014; Johansson, Naurin and Lindahl, 2019). The cost of staying outside might, however, increase as the number of EMU outsiders declines, and not least as the UK – being the most heavyweight EMU outsider – has left the EU. We therefore test the effect of being part of the euro group.

4.3 Politico-economic systems, government ideology and size lead to stronger cooperative ties

In Table 3, the results of three linear regression models are displayed to show the effects (beta coefficients) of the factors outlined above on the network relations between the member states in the three latest survey rounds (2015, 2018 and 2021). When running the regressions on the yearly figures, the results are largely the same, but not identical (see further discussion of this below). Each network tie can theoretically vary between 0, where there is no network relation, and 1, where all respondents from a member state have mentioned only one other member state as a cooperation partner. This means that the dependent variable is continuous. To account for the fact that the observations are not independent (the three survey rounds include essentially the same observations), the standard errors have been clustered on the pairwise relations. The first four factors that we test capture the distance between any two member states in terms of their interests. On these variables, we expect a negative effect, which means that as the difference decreases, the network tie gets stronger. For the rest of the factors tested, we expect a positive relation, as they are expected to increase the value of the incoming tie to each member state.

Starting with the effects of similarities in politico-economic systems and government ideologies, all variables show statistically significant negative effects, in line with expectations. This means that when two member states are more closely aligned, their cooperative ties are stronger. The size of these effects (the coefficients in Table 3) is best illustrated

by comparing the pair of states with the shortest distance on each measure to the states with the largest distance. The differences in the strength of network relations between different member states identified below are predictions based on the coefficients in Table 3 and not factual differences in network scores.

For the variable capturing the member states' politico-economic systems, the difference in predicted strength of the network relation between the two states with the smallest distance (Italy and Finland in 2018[4]) and the states with the largest distance (France and Ireland in 2021) is 5.5 percentage points. Expressed differently, the expected network scores given by Italian respondents to Finland (and vice versa) in 2018 are 5.5 percentage points higher than the expected network scores given by the French respondents to Ireland in 2021. For reference, if the network scores were evenly spread among the member states, each link between two member states would amount to 3.7%.

For the variable measuring the distance between governments on the economic left–right dimension, there are three pairs of member states that have the same left–right position, and hence where no ideological distance exists; these are Croatia and Italy in 2015, Malta and Ireland in 2018 and Belgium and the UK in 2018. The network score between these pairs of states is predicted to be 2 percentage points stronger compared to the pair that is most distant from each other on the economic left–right dimension (Cyprus and Greece in 2015). On the GAL-TAN dimension, the Irish and Austrian governments in 2015 had the same position, while the largest observed distance was found between Hungary and Luxembourg in 2015. The predicted effect of this difference is a network tie 3 percentage points stronger between Ireland and Austria. On the European integration dimension, the largest difference is between Portugal and the UK in 2018, while it is non-existent between Luxembourg and Austria in 2015 and between Croatia and Bulgaria in 2015. This amounts to a predicted difference in the network tie of 4 percentage points.

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[4] While Italy and Finland are often not lumped together in terms of welfare state model, they are very similar on the components we use here. In 2018, the Finnish total taxation as share of GDP was 42.5%, the social expenditures made up 30.1% of GDP and collective bargaining coverage was 88.8%. The same figures for Italy were 41.9%, 28.8% and 80%. The differences are larger in 2015 and 2021.

Table 3. **Regression analysis of the network relations, 2015–2021**

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Difference in politico-economic system	-0.010*** (0.002)	-0.010*** (0.002)	-0.011*** (0.002)
Difference in left–right ideology	-0.003** (0.001)		
Difference in cultural ideology (GAL-TAN)		-0.004*** (0.002)	
Difference in attitude towards European integration			-0.007*** (0.002)
Presidency	-0.009 (0.006)	-0.004 (0.006)	-0.010* (0.006)
Presidency past term	-0.002 (0.007)	-0.003 (0.007)	-0.001 (0.007)
Presidency two terms back	-0.011 (0.007)	-0.007 (0.007)	-0.012* (0.007)
Presidency three terms back	-0.011** (0.006)	-0.011** (0.006)	-0.010* (0.006)
Trio presidency	-0.015*** (0.004)	-0.015*** (0.004)	-0.015*** (0.004)
Population size	0.005*** (0.001)	0.004*** (0.001)	0.005*** (0.001)
Euro insider	0.003 (0.004)	0.002 (0.004)	-0.000 (0.005)
Intercept	0.046*** (0.007)	0.051*** (0.007)	0.053*** (0.007)
R2	0.133	0.140	0.144
N	2214	2214	2214

Note: The table displays beta coefficients and standard errors (in parentheses). The regression analyses were run on the data from 2015, 2018 and 2021 combined. To account for the non-independence of the samples in the three rounds, the standard errors are clustered on the pair-wise relations of the member states. * Significant at 0.1-level. ** Significant at 0.05-level. *** Significant at 0.01-level.

These predicted effects are based on models covering all three included survey rounds. Some of the effects, however, appear to be year dependent, as none of the ideological variables showed statistically significant effects in 2015, and the economic left–right measure was only significant in 2018 (and then only at the 0.1-level). It is thus possible to conclude that ideological similarity on the GAL-TAN dimension and European integration dimension has become a more important factor for cooperation in recent years, while it is more uncertain for the economic left–right dimension.

When it comes to the presidency variables, all of them show negative effects contrary to the expectation, and it is only the variable indicating whether two member states belong to the same presidency trio that shows a statistically significant effect in all models. That the effect is negative shows, however, that belonging to the same presidency trio lowers the network score between the member states, rather than increasing it. As hinted at above, the presidency trios were designed to be heterogeneous, and this might be the reason why, despite providing a basis for cooperation, the ties between the trio states are lower than with other states. In this sense, it can even be interpreted as providing further evidence for the importance of interest similarity in the formation of cooperative relations.

The presidency effects are also rather volatile, and the negative effect of the presidency trio is not statistically significant in 2021 and only weakly

significant in 2015 (0.1-level). The effects of holding the presidency or having recently held the presidency are, in turn, highly contingent on the member state in the different survey rounds, which indicates that it might not be the presidency position as such that matters, but rather other member state traits. When doing the regression analysis on yearly data, the member state that held the presidency two terms back from the 2021 survey round was Germany, where the effect was statistically significant and positive. However, this likely has more to do with it being Germany than the fact that it was the country that held the presidency a year before. Likewise, the statistically significant negative effect on the variable indicating which member state held the presidency three terms back (18 months) from the time of the survey round is probably a consequence of it containing Greece, Slovakia and Croatia, all of whom belong to the lower end of the ranking displayed in Figure 2, regardless of the year. These effects therefore seem to be related rather to the member states as such than to their prior presidencies. If a longer time series of survey data were analysed, or if the points of measurement were closer to each other than three years, the results might have been more conclusive about these effects.

Finally, the variable measuring the member states' population size is positive and statistically significant, which is in line with expectations. This means that larger member states have stronger incoming network ties than smaller member states. Being a member of the EMU, on the contrary, does not affect the strength of network ties to the other member states, even when running the regression only on the survey data from 2021. This is in line with our previous findings that being an EMU outsider does not have an impact on the strength of member states' network relations (Naurin and Lindahl, 2010, 2014; Johansson, Naurin and Lindahl, 2019), and this appears to remain true even in an EU without the UK as a member.

5. Concluding remarks

The point of departure for this analysis was that cooperative relations between member states in the Council are important for both enabling compromises and shaping their policy content. The survey data gathered in 2021 have demonstrated

that the stability we previously observed in member states' network capital and cooperative relations remains. At the same time, windows of opportunity can emerge for member states to improve their networks, which it is clear that the Netherlands has succeeded in doing in the post-Brexit EU. The position of the Netherlands in the top trio of member states according to the network capital ranking also highlights that it is possible for member states to have stronger positions in the network than their size would suggest. Sweden and Denmark also stand out in this respect. While the regression analyses confirmed a positive effect of member state size, there are other factors that matter, too.

> "[...] the stability of network relations is at least partially explained by the importance of the similarities in member states' politico-economic systems."

When searching for explanations for the cooperative relations between member states, we find that the stability of network relations is at least partially explained by the importance of the similarities in member states' politico-economic systems. The more volatile ideological similarities of member state governments seem to have become more important in recent years, and in particular, the cultural GAL-TAN dimension and European integration dimension have become statistically significant determinants for cooperative relations. This might be a consequence of an increasing politicization of European integration and a greater prominence for conflict on issues structured by these dimensions rather than traditional left–right politics (e.g. Hooghe and Marks, 2009).

Our findings on the lack of effect for the Council presidency might be related to the importance of member state similarities and the emphasis that the survey respondents put on common interests as reasons for cooperation. While the presidency might have the potential to work as a platform to establish relationships with representatives of other member states, it might be secondary to shared interests. In addition, the survey question asked about cooperation *in order to develop a common*

position. The task of the presidency, however, is not to take positions, but rather to operate as a broker, which may be why this question might lead respondents away from the presidency as a key partner.

> "[...] the political price of not being part of every European integration initiative appears to be limited, at least in terms of having a negative impact on network capital."

Finally, confirming earlier analyses, we observed no negative effect of being outside of the EMU. This is something we have found since the first survey data were gathered in 2003 (Naurin and Lindahl, 2010); it has not changed as a consequence of the deepening of integration in the Eurozone (Johansson, Naurin and Lindahl, 2019), and it does not seem to be affected by the continued reduction of member states staying outside. We can therefore conclude that the political price of not being part of every European integration initiative appears to be limited, at least in terms of having a negative impact on network capital.

It should be emphasized here that what we have provided is not an exhaustive list of explanations for the strength of the member states' network relations. This is also empirically visible when looking at the explained variance (R2 in Table 3), which is relatively low for the three models. The strength of cooperative relations is likely determined by a number of different factors, some related to micro level factors of individual relations and some to member state characteristics or idiosyncrasies. The latter can be anything from how the member states work with formulating positions and organizing their work with EU affairs generally in the national administrations, to more normative factors such as commitment to shared norms and values. While one strength of our measure of member state network capital is that it crosscuts several policy areas, there is likely also variation in the strength of relations depending on the files and policy areas under negotiation. This is another source of variation worth further exploration in the future.

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