The Netherlands and Sweden in a renewed EU:

Why some smaller states are more successful than others

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Abstract

Britain's decision to leave the European Union (EU) has affected the position of member states (MS) through a wide range of policy areas. While the Dutch government has resisted pressures to partly replace Britain's budgetary role within the 2021-2027 Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF), Sweden has hoped to create a more social Europe, in order to respond to European citizens' disenchantment with the Union's approach on employment issues. This thesis aims to examine why the Dutch conception and performance within the MFF have successfully changed in light of Britain's pending departure, while Swedish influence on EU employment policy has remained limited. The findings of the research suggest that policy priorities at the EU level, differences in support for the two areas and domestic developments are responsible for the dichotomy identified between the two countries and their respective policy priorities.

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2. List of abbreviations

CAP	Common Agricultural Policy
CDA	Christen-Democratisch Appèl
CEE	Central and Eastern European
CEEC	Central and Eastern European countries
FPA	Foreign Policy Analysis
HLG	Hanseatic League group
EC	European Commission
ECFR	European Council on Foreign Relations
ECJ	European Court of Justice
EESC	European Economic and Social Committee
ELA	European Labour Authority
EMS	European Monetary System
EMU	European Monetary Union
EP	European Parliament
EPSR	European Pillar of Social Rights
EU	European Union
FvD	Forum voor Democratie
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
LO	The Swedish Trade Union Confederation
MFF	Multiannual Financial Framework
MP	Member of Parliament
MS	Member State(s)
OMC	Open method of coordination
PM	Prime Minister
PVV	Partij voor de Vrijheid
QMV	Qualified majority voting
SIEPS	Swedish Institute for European Policy Studies
VVD	Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie

3. Introduction

"Our project goes on, and although the British vote may have slowed us down a little, we must continue our course towards the objectives we share with renewed ambition"

– Speech by Jean Claude Junker, President of the European Commission (EC) (Juncker, 2016)

2016 is likely to become one of the most significant years in the history of European integration. By universal suffrage, a majority of British voters decided that the time had come for the United Kingdom (UK) to leave the European Union (EU), a call by which the newly-appointed British Prime Minister Theresa May quickly adhered to. The instability on Britain's domestic politics provided by the referendum results became clear in its immediate aftermath, not least thanks to a shift from a moderately Eurosceptic to a pro-'Brexit' government and an intensification of already internecine conflicts between the country's different political groupings (Siddique, Sparrow, & Rawlinson, 2016).

On a European level, meanwhile, the effects of Britain's pending departure have been deeply felt by the EU's political establishment. The fact that a country has decided for the first time to leave the Union, being as well one of its largest economic and political actors, has raised serious questions about the future of European integration. Although Britain's withdrawal appears to have strengthened European commitments among the remaining MS, it has nevertheless accelerated a process of identity reflection among EU leaders, with often stark differences on what a new EU should look like. While Donald Tusk, the President of the Council of the EU, has called for more "practical" and "tangible results" to be realised in the Union's post-Brexit era (Tusk, 2016), EC President Jean-Claude Juncker, for his part, has envisioned a Union continuing with a "renewed energy" and focussing on "a revival of continental ambition". These goals, he maintained, ought to be reflected, among others, through an enlarged EU budget and the establishment of a more "socially-orientated" Europe (Juncker, 2016). At the same time, a reborn Franco-German cooperation has aimed to strengthen integration among the eurozone MS, with the possible effect of casting non-eurozone ones aside (Oltermann, 2017). In light of these developments, smaller MS are required to increase their presence within EU politics in order to maintain their influence, or face so-called 'faits accomplis' (De Gruyter, 2018).

The Netherlands and Sweden are two smaller MS that have been strongly involved in discussions on the future of the EU. The Dutch have shared a vital alliance with Britain on the Union's seven-year budget plan, the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) (Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2019), in order to prevent any increases to their already high contributions. As such, Britain's pending departure is problematic for the Dutch since they have not only come under considerate pressure to find new allies, but they are also required by the EC and many MS to fill a large part of the financial

loss a British withdrawal is expected to cause. Unsurprisingly, Dutch Prime Minister (PM) Mark Rutte has firmly rejected such requests, describing them as "unfair" and "unacceptable", and urging EU officials to accept a smaller budget in light of Britain's pending departure (Rutte, 2018). Similarly, a British withdrawal is expected to cause significant economic and political challenges for Sweden, not least by French calls for a stronger eurozone (Macron, 2017) which, in Britain's absence, might significantly reduce Sweden's influence and those of other non-eurozone MS (Sjögren, 2017). With one of the most socially conservative countries leaving the EU, however, Sweden may be able to advance its role in one of its key policy areas, namely employment policy. Since its 1995 EU accession, the country has aimed to strengthen the Union's social dimension and alleviate fears at home that European integration will reduce Swedish social standards (Miles, 2001). In the aftermath of the Brexit referendum, Swedish PM Stefan Löfven argued that, for the EU to survive, the time had come for leaders "to create jobs and do it with decent wages and conditions" (Sveriges Radio, 2016).

To put their aims into practice, the Dutch have created an alliance with like-minded, predominantly Northern EU MS as a counterweight to MS pushing for a far-reaching fiscal integration (Rijksoverheid - Dutch Government, 2018). Increasingly, the Dutch seem to be regarded as a leading force within the MFF discussions, offering an alternative power block against the so-called 'Franco-German axis' (O'Leary, 2018). The Swedes, for their part, have been at the forefront of several employment initiatives, such as the revision of the Posted Workers Directive and the establishment of the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR), all aiming to balance economic with social interests (Löfven & Jucker, 2017). Yet despite these developments, it seems that the Swedes have been unable to successfully tackle social issues at home and abroad, and a stronger coordination of national employment policies remains a far cry from Löfven's post-Brexit aims (Pelling, 2019; Schulten & Luebker, 2019). All of this raises the question: Why have the Netherlands and Sweden responded so differently to the developments after the British referendum?

Although a substantial amount of work has focussed on the expected effects of a British withdrawal on Britain itself (Farrand, 2017; Hantrais, 2018; Plomien, 2018), as well as on general changes within the different Council formations (Staal, 2016), far less work has been conducted on how this development will affect the position of smaller MS. To continue, although Britain's pending withdrawal is argued to have had a major influence on how countries such as the Netherlands perceive themselves within EU-decision making, no thorough study has been conducted yet on how identities of MS have shifted within different policy areas. These developments are unfortunate, since they not only prevent an understanding of shifting power relations within the EU, but they also neglect the position of a group of MS that is expected to be affected the most by Britain's withdrawal (Huhe, Naurin, & Thomson, 2017). This thesis aims to examine which factors have contributed to the rather

different developments in the roles of the Netherlands and Sweden within EU decision-making in the aftermath of Britain's decision to leave the EU. Considering the limited scope of the study and the broad range of policy areas within the EU, the research will focus on two key policy areas for the two countries, namely the MFF for the Netherlands, and employment policy for Sweden.

The first section of this thesis will provide a literature review, which will help the reader understand why the Netherlands and Sweden have been chosen from a large group of smaller EU MS, what defines their influence and why the MFF and employment policy have been such key issues to their national and European identities. The research design will discuss the rationale behind the chosen theoretical framework and how it is applied in evaluating the collected primary and secondary data. Role theory provides an instructive framework to examine these issues, since it enables a research on the roles both countries conceive of themselves (role conception) and how these roles relate to the states' actions (role performance) (Aggestam, 2004, p. 88) through the examination of discourse. Following Herman's line of thinking (1994), which states that learning can only occur through a change in beliefs and the means to achieve a goal, the research will firstly aim to identify how exactly the role conceptions and performances of both countries have shifted. This will enable the research to proceed with more certainty on the main question of the thesis, namely why these countries have developed so differently. Three factors, which have been regarded by several scholars as relevant in enhancing the bargaining success of MS, will be examined, namely 1) the salience of both issues, 2) the external support the countries have enjoyed and 3) the domestic issues that have influenced them. In order to evaluate the data, representative extracts from speeches and statements of Dutch and Swedish government officials will be collected. The results section will outline the findings from these extracts and from other collected primary and secondary data, followed by a discussion and a conclusion. The limited amount of research does not allow for a comprehensive study of all policy areas for both countries, let alone the study of developments in other smaller MS. Instead, this thesis' objective is to stimulate further research in other countries and policy areas, in order to offer a more comprehensive notion of the effects of Britain's pending departure on smaller MS.

3.1 Literature Review

3.1.1 Smaller MS in EU decision-making

The main aim of this research is to uncover how smaller MS respond to an event that is expected to have a profound impact on their positions. The term 'smaller' has been chosen as a less ambiguous term to define the Netherlands and Sweden throughout this thesis. Although a general agreement seems to exist on the impact a country's size has on its influence, there is a different understanding to what size actually constitutes. For example, in her research on the voting power of small MS within the Council, Panke (2010) defines small MS as those that have a voting power below the average Council voting size, namely 23 votes. An immediate problem that arises from such methodology is that it fails to define countries that fall outside this scope but are not regarded as 'big' either, namely the Netherlands and Romania, therefore preventing an understanding of the unique position these countries might enjoy within the Council. Such a quantitative approach is also criticised by Thorhalsson (2006, pp. 11-13), who points to the often very different outcomes in defining size and influence when looking purely at quantitative means. For example, although Sweden may be considered small in terms of population, in geographic size, it exceeds a country that is almost eight times larger in demographic size, namely Germany. Furthermore, in their study on bargaining success in the EU, Arregui and Thomson (2009) find little evidence to support any views on either new or less populous MS being less influential.

A 2017 study by the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR) offers in turn a unique insight into how smaller countries are viewed by EU diplomats and how to understand their positions within EU decision-making. Firstly, the findings of the study suggest that the Netherlands and Sweden are generally considered as being two of the most influential countries among a group of influential smaller MS, referred to as the 'Affluent 7', which includes Austria, the Benelux and the Nordic MS. Secondly, not only are both countries regarded as leading countries within respectively the Benelux and Nordic regions, they are also considered to be "pivotal countries" for "coalition activities", as they are able to "reach out in their neighbourhood more than other countries" (Leonard, Janning, Klavehn, & Möller, 2018). Interestingly, in several areas, such as economic and social policy, both countries are considered to be more relevant coalition-making partners than other, larger MS, such as Spain and Poland (Janning & Zunneberg, 2017). Considering the unique position the Netherlands and Sweden enjoy within EU decision-making, yet the large discrepancy in what factors are considered as relevant in defining size, defining both countries as 'smaller' does justice to the influence the two MS have and is less ambiguous than the existing literature.

3.1.2 Influence in EU decision-making

As described above, different authors have come to different conclusions on the relevance of population size in defining size. The problems that arise from using population as a criterion are in fact not only addressed by more recent studies, such as that of Janning and Zunneberg (2017), but are also reflected through Panke's own study. For example, both studies suggest that despite their similar demographic size, Luxembourg enjoys far more influence than Malta within the Council due to its history as a founding MS and its active diplomacy with other MS and EU institutions. Similarly, definitions based purely on Gross Domestic Product (GDP) rates or other economic measurements are equally problematic. How can we explain the fact that the Danish flexicurity model, which aims to combine flexible employment with high-level social security, is regarded by the EC as an example for other MS (European Commission, 2015), despite Denmark having one of the smallest labour forces and economic weight within the EU?

Other, less materialistic means are necessary in order to examine the influence of smaller MS. Although Bailer acknowledges the relevance of economic size, she addresses as well the presence of conceptual aspects, such as the "partisan preferences of EU governments" (Bailer, 2010, p. 747). In reviewing Naurin's study, which suggests that geographical proximity is more relevant for bargaining success than political affiliation (Naurin, 2008), she states that "the salience of a negotiation topic and the importance of domestic actors" could be more relevant than political affiliations (Bailer, 2010, p. 748). Another study she discusses has been conducted by Manow et al (2008), who examine developments within social policy and argue that "[n]ational elections determine government composition and thereby also determine which of the competing economic and social interest coalitions will enjoy privileged access and political representation" (p. 34). Bailer concludes her review of studies on political affiliations by stating that it remains unclear whether left-right politics are indeed a relevant aspect within Council configurations and argues that "potential linkages between partisan orientations and bargaining success in the Council have not received sufficient attention" (Bailer, 2010, p. 748).

Another aspect that Bailer focusses on is the domestic constraints on a country's performance. In a brief review on what has been written on the effects of domestic issues on MS within the Council, she finds that the results are rather mixed, and that more studies need to be conducted in order to enhance understanding of such developments (Bailer, 2010, p. 747). Similarly, Thorhallsson criticises the focus on pure material aspects and tries to combine these with conceptual frameworks, such as the way in which a country's capabilities are perceived by its political elite. He applies the 'Action Competence Continuum' to measure the ability of a country to formulate policies and the 'Vulnerability Continuum' to measure the political risks that a country faces in doing this (Thorhallsson,

2006, p. 15). In one case, he juxtaposes Sweden with Switzerland, describing Sweden as an active country that perceives the international environment as a suitable place to diffuse its normative power while, on the contrary, suggesting that Switzerland enjoys less influence due to its more reactive stance to international developments and less ambitious approach (Thorhallsson, 2006, p. 26). As the table below indicates, not only are Sweden's ambitions and priorities regarded as relevant by its external environment (external capacity), by they also enjoy a strong support from domestic actors, including its citizens (internal capacity).

	INTERNAL CAPACITY		EXTERNAL CAPACITY	
	Action Competence	Vulnerability	Action Competence	Vulnerability
Ambitions	High-Full	Low	High	Low–medium
Priorities	High	Low	High	Low–medium
Ideas about the international system	High	Low	High	Low–medium

Table 1. Internal and external factors determining a country's influence capacity (Thorhallsson, 2006)

On the other hand, in identifying which aspects enhance a country's bargaining success, Arregui and Thomson (2009) use a so-called 'Nash formula', in which they include the position of a MS, its capabilities and the salience of an issue and compare it with the policy outcome to identify how successful a country has been in influencing discussions. Nevertheless, both researchers do mention the element of 'luck' for MS when the eventual policy outcome simply aligns with their initial position. A brief reflection on how size and influence are being perceived suggests firstly that traditional views are too simplistic to examine the influence a state can exert. Secondly, a broad range of factors are regarded by studies, albeit to various degrees, as relevant in influencing a country's position within the Council and the broader international context. Focussing on the salience an issue enjoys, the political support a country may receive and the domestic factors that influence its performance provide an interesting point from which to examine the position of the Netherlands and Sweden.

3.1.3 The Netherlands and the MFF

Over the course of European integration, the Dutch have been strong advocates of fiscal discipline and sound public finances. This has been evidenced through, for example, the country's 2004 Council Presidency, where it urged other MS to secure "sound public finances" and a "compliance with the rules of the Stability and Growth Pact" (Keulen & Pijpers, 2005) and again during its 2016 Presidency, where it advocated "a Union that focuses on the essential" with "sound, future-proof European finances and a robust Eurozone", which ought to be "extend[ed] to the European multiannual budget".

In 2015, a year prior to the referendum on Britain's EU membership, the Dutch government had requested other MS to agree on lowering spending ceilings for the 2014-2019 MFF, as well committing itself to organising a seminar on budgetary issues, with the aim of reviewing contributions and benefits and discussing options to modernise the EU budget (Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2015). Strong resistance among the Dutch general public and Dutch officials towards further financial transfers to other MS has been evidenced through, among others, the negative public opinion on the Dutch participation in bailing out crisis-ridden MS (Korteweg, 2017) and heated discussions between Rutte and other EU officials on the continuation of these financial transfers (Peeperkorn, 2014). As such, sound public spending and limited budgetary contributions can be regarded as core aspects of the Dutch identity within EU politics.

The ability of the Netherlands, as a smaller MS, to influence political developments has been demonstrated on several occasions. For example, Maes and Verdun (2005) argue that, through the coordination of their economic policies in the 1960's and '70's, the Netherlands and Belgium set themselves as examples for successful economic cooperation, leading eventually to the establishment of the European Monetary System (EMS). Furthermore, the Dutch were able to secure their interest in creating more fiscal responsibility within the European Monetary Union (EMU) by ensuring, among others, a strong cooperation with the German government. Views of the Dutch as a leading country within economic and financial affairs have not only been expressed by the Dutch government itself (Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2019), but also seem to be grounded in the views expressed by, among others, French President Emmanuel Macron, with the latter viewing Rutte as a leading figure of liberal Europe (Clemenceau, 2019). This is further underlined by Janning (2016), who considers the Netherlands to be "the best example of a country punching above its economic or demographic weight", as the country's influence is placed above that of countries with a larger economic and demographic size, including Spain and Poland. Thus, the Netherlands has been and continuous to be regarded as relevant for shaping discussions on economic and fiscal policy.

3.1.4 Sweden and employment policy

For Sweden, employment policy has long formed a central part of the country's identity within the EU and the wider international context. From the 1950's and onwards, Sweden became a strong advocate of a more 'social' world, presenting itself as a midway between the Communist East and the free-market orientated West, often being considered as a model to other countries. Furthermore, retaining a Nordic welfare model, with a strong role for the government in combatting social issues, finds support across progressive and conservative parties, making it therefore a core value of Sweden's national identity (Miles, 1997). On the EU level, employment initiatives have been strongly intertwined with the country's European identity. EU integration was seen by then Swedish PM Ingvar Carlsson as

a means to tackle employment issues that were badly affecting the Swedish economy (Johansson, 2017, p. 4); however, a large part of the Swedish public and political parties feared that EU membership would threaten the Swedish welfare model, since the EU was perceived as being more market-orientated and less concerned with social issues (Ringmar, 1998). Swedish officials aimed to alleviate such fears by stressing the possibility of Sweden to change the Union from within by prioritising social policy, as evidenced by the strong relevance combatting employment issues across the EU was given within the Swedish political debates during the 2014 European Parliament (EP) elections (Berg & Polk, 2014).

Sweden's conception as an advocate of a more 'social' world is strongly reflected through its role within the EU. During the discussions on the 1997 Amsterdam Treaty, two years after Sweden's accession, the Swedes were successful in securing the inclusion of an Employment Chapter, introducing principles on fair and healthy labour conditions. Also, during the country's 2001 and 2009 Council Presidencies, Swedish officials advocated for a stronger focus on employment initiatives (Bjurulf, 2003; Government Offices of Sweden, 2010). Although several areas within employment policy, such as labour safety, have become subject to a shared competence between the EU and its MS, the bulk of issues still rely on an open method of coordination (OMC), which includes an exchange of best practices and peer pressuring (Anderson, 2015). Nevertheless, there seems to be some capacity for smaller MS to affect those areas through normative means. Although other countries, such as Denmark and the Netherlands, have been leading forces within EU employment policy by promoting for example flexicurity (European Commission, 2015), Sweden is still considered a model for other countries in the fields of employment and training (OECD, 2015). As such, not only is employment policy a strong part of Sweden's domestic and international identity, but the country has also aimed to reflect this identity through its performance. The Dutch and Swedish roles, as described above, are summarised in the table below.

Country	The Netherlands	Sweden
Size	Smaller MS	Smaller MS
Influence	High (sub-regional leader)	High (sub-regional leader)
Status membership	Strongly integrated	Averagely integrated
Policy priority	MFF	Employment policy

Table 2. The Netherlands and Sweden within the EU

3.1.5 The effects of Britain's pending departure

There is a strong belief among scholars and journalists that a British withdrawal from the EU will result in a reconfiguration of national positions and power relations. According to De Gruyter (2018) many MS fear that if they will not engage early on in the discussions on a post-Brexit EU, France and Germany, often regarded as the driving forces behind EU integration, "will present them with faits accomplis—especially when the UK is no longer around to act as a counterbalance". Such concerns seem to be grounded in studies conducted on the effects of a British withdrawal for EU decision-making. For example, in his study on power shifts within the various Council configurations, Staal (2016) expects the balance of power within each configuration to change sharply, most often to the detriment of smaller MS. Huhe, Naurin and Thomson (2017) suggest a similar development, as they expect "smaller and medium-sized member states like the Netherlands" to be more affected than larger ones. Körner (2018), on the other hand, has focussed on the effects that Britain's absence may have on the 2021-2027 MFF by providing different scenarios for a new EU budget. In the case the Union's budget would decrease, he suggests that the Netherlands would in fact become a net recipient.

Despite the valuable insights these studies provide on expected outcomes within different policy areas, they do not examine in detail the specific position of each MS, especially the smaller ones. This is striking, and even more so for the cases of the Netherlands and Sweden, as these are two countries that are expected to be strongly affected by Britain's pending departure. The British have historically shared Dutch fears of fiscal excessiveness and larger financial contributions from wealthier EU MS (Chang, 2006) (Janning, 2016). Unsurprisingly, within the 2007-2013 and 2014-2020 MFF discussions, the Dutch strategy partly rested on an alliance with Britain, which resulted among others in a rebate on Dutch contributions, similar to the British one (Schout & Rood, 2013, pp. 235-246). In addition, between 2009 and 2015, the Netherlands was found to have voted more than 88% in common with the UK in the Council, second only to Sweden (Hix, Hagemann, & Frantescu, 2016). With the EC aiming for an increase in contributions and the removal of all rebates (Körner, 2018), the loss one of the Netherlands' strongest allies poses a serious threat to the Dutch position. According to Dutch Member of Parliament (MP) Peter Omtzigt (2018), the EU is now "geographically spreading southwards and eastwards and [the Dutch] are not central in that process any more" and while the Dutch could count in previous cases on German support within economic and monetary policy, there are signs that the German government might be more open to Macron's demands for larger contributions and the introduction of new risk-sharing tools (Taylor, 2018). On the contrary, although Britain's pending withdrawal presents a threat to some issues that are central to Swedish interests, such as the deepening of the eurozone (Rijksoverheid - Dutch Government, 2018), it may enable the

Swedish government to strengthen EU employment policy. In the past, most British governments, as well UK business, have rigorously opposed calls to integrate national employment policies (Hantrais, 2018; Plomien, 2018). After the referendum on Britain's membership, although Löfven suggested that each MS should maintain its own welfare model, he stressed that "the social dimension is a prerequisite for a sustainable Europe" (Sveriges Radio, 2016). The table below explains the relation between the two fields.

Policy	MFF	Employment policy
Competence	Shared	(Mostly) coordinative
Role UK	Strong (large contributor)	Strong (against strong coordination)

Table 3. Brief comparison between the MFF and employment policy

4. Research Design

4.1 An introduction to role theory

4.1.1 Role conception and role performance

After having laid out the basis and consequences of Dutch and Swedish preferences within their respective policy fields of focus, the moment has come to introduce a useful theoretical framework to make sense of this national behavior, namely role theory. Originating firstly in the field of social science (Biddle & Thomas, 1966), role theory was later introduced into foreign policy analysis (FPA) by Holsti (1970) as a means to understand the different roles – e.g. 'mediator' and 'non-aligned' – that were constructed during the Cold War with respect to the dominant 'capitalist' and 'communist' identities. For example, although Sweden was culturally and politically embedded in the Western world, it officially conceived itself as a mediator between the two sides, and was therefore expected to behave differently than countries belonging to the two dominant identities (Ringmar, 1998). From an epistemological perspective, role theory is relevant since it provides an understanding of the connection between agent and structure, where a structure may constrain an actor's actions but the actor still has the ability to influence the context of a decision (Aggestam, 2004, p. 83). In the case of the MFF, although national contributions to the EU budget are seen as a limit to national fiscal sovereignty, each MS has the ability to influence any final outcome, as such an outcome requires unanimity among all MS.

Unlike other theories, role theory enables us to examine the identity of an actor and to understand why it acts in a certain way by focussing on the role a state *conceives* of itself (role conception) and the actual role it *performs* in international relations (role performance) (Harnisch, 2011, p. 8). According to Krotz (2002, p. 3), national role conceptions should be understood as "domestically shared views and understandings regarding the proper role and purpose of one's own state as a social collectivity in the international arena". In this sense, national role conceptions can be thought of as 'roadmaps', with certain national characteristics prescribing what behaviour is considered as appropriate for a country within a specific situation (Aggestam, 2004, pp. 88-89). How a country is perceived by its external environment is relevant as well as, through interactions within a social structure, social norms are transmitted exerting expectations on how a country should behave (Harnisch, 2011, pp. 7-10). In turn, role performance is "the actual foreign policy behaviour in terms of decisions and actions undertaken", being "particularly sensitive to the situational context in which it is enacted" (Aggestam, 2004, p. 88). Examining a country's role performance is relevant, since it enables a comparison between how a country perceives its role to be on a specific issue within a social structure and how it actually performs this role.

4.1.2 Role learning and policy change

Hermann (1990) identifies four categories that may alter national policies, namely:

a) “changes in the external environment”;
b) “a change in political leadership”;
c) “a realignment of coalitions at the bureaucratic or societal levels”; and
d) “a change in individual beliefs about policy goals or the optimal means to achieve them” (pp. 289-290).

Views on when and how learning occurs differ sharply. For example, Jarosz and Nye define learning as “the acquisition of new knowledge or information that leads to change in behaviour” (Jarosz & Nye, 1993, p. 130). Following this line of thinking, we could expect learning to occur in either of these categories. In contrast, Levy questions such views and argues that learning can only result from the last category (Levy, 1994, p. 290). The problem that arises from the first definition is that policy change is regarded as an expected outcome of a learning process; however, quite often actors are prevented from applying knowledge that has been learned into policy outcomes due to internal and external constraints, such as political crises and shifts in government. As such, a cognitive shift among MS as a result of a Britain’s decision to leave the EU would not be sufficient enough to argue that learning has occurred; rather, such shifts need to be visible within policy outcomes.

4.2 Applying role theory

In examining why the Netherlands and Sweden have adapted differently to Britain’s decision to leave the Union, the thesis firstly aimed to provide an understanding of how the role of the Netherlands within the MFF and the Swedish one within employment policy have changed. The use of role theory was essential in this case, as it allowed the thesis to examine the different ideas that have constructed the identities of the two countries within the two policy areas and have influenced their behaviour. Understanding the ‘how’ before examining the ‘why’ is relevant, since such an approach reduces the possibility of expectations resting on false assumptions. For example, although the former Austrian government had been stressing its close affiliation with Central and Eastern European countries (CEEC), especially on the issue of migration, in the ECFR study, a majority of Austrian diplomats referred to Germany as the country’s main partner, while relations with CEEC were argued to be distant (Leonard, Janning, Klavehn, & Möller, 2018). The hypothesis section focussed therefore on, among others, previous speeches and statements by Dutch and Swedish government officials, which served to identify how the two countries perceived themselves within their respective policy areas. Examples of these are statements by Löfven on his government’s policies (2015) (2019) and the Dutch State of the European Union annual reports (2015) (2016) (2019), which outline the main elements of the Dutch position for each year.

By focussing on views and ideas within the three main factors discussed in the literature review, namely the salience of issues, (external) political support and domestic constraints, the research aimed to examine to which extent these factors may have constrained the identities and performance of these states. After providing three main hypotheses based on these categories, the hypotheses were evaluated by the use of further primary and secondary data. In particular, data collected from interviews with policy makers within the fields of budgetary and employment affairs were a cornerstone to this evaluation, as they provided the thesis with more in-depth information on the two issues and the positions of the Dutch and Swedish governments. In the Dutch case, an interview was conducted with a Dutch diplomat working on EU budgetary affairs. In the Swedish case, the research was able to receive data from more than one policy maker, including a Member of the European Parliament (MEP), a representative of a Swedish interest group focussing on Swedish and European labour policies and a Swedish diplomat working on EU employment policy.

5. Hypothesis

According to Levy (1994) "[a] reevaluation of fundamental assumptions and interests may be unlikely to occur in the absence of a major crisis or policy failure, but once it occurs it often reshapes the political landscape in a way that leads to further change" (p. 302). As outlined in the research design, Levy suggests that only a change in beliefs and means to influence policy outcomes can lead to learning. This section will firstly examine whether such changes have occurred to the Dutch and Swedish identities within the MFF and employment policy respectively, while providing later on some explanations as to why these might have occurred.

5.1 Change of Dutch beliefs?

The previous sections reflected a strong role of the Netherlands within the MFF as fiscally conservative actor. For the bigger part, Dutch beliefs within the MFF do not seem to have changed. At the end of 2016, in the aftermath of the referendum on Britain's membership, the Dutch government had already stated in its 2017 annual State of the EU that a post-2020 MFF would have to be restructured and should focus on areas where the EU was truly able to have a sufficient impact (Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2016). Rutte's Bertelsmann Speech in March 2018 and his reaction to the Commission proposal in May 2018 underlined this position, stressing the need for a "smaller budget" and "spending less" (Rutte, 2018). Although the Dutch government was advised to take a more constructive stance (Korteweg, 2018), the Dutch position remained unchanged. In June 2018, at a speech in the EP session in Strasbourg, Rutte argued once again for an EU of "less is more", focussing on "its core tasks" while strongly opposing any aims to establish a so-called 'transfer union' and urging MS to use "the tools [the EU] already [had] in place" (Rutte, 2018). Again, in the 2019 State of the EU, the Dutch government remained strongly committed to its previous position by arguing for "an honest distribution of benefits and burdens" and a smaller EU budget (Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2019).

What has occurred, however, is a change in the perception of the Dutch position within EU affairs. According to O'Leary (2018), due to a strong support from other smaller MS, Rutte has successfully positioned "himself as a counterweight to Berlin and Paris", a role that the UK once encompassed. This view is shared as well by others, who argue that the Dutch have not only aimed to become the leading liberal force in the EU with Britain leaving (Khan, 2018), but that they have also actively tried to lead a group of smaller Northern EU MS in doing so (Korteweg, 2018). These aims are reflected in the 2019 State of the EU, with the Dutch government stating that "more than in the past, an appeal will be made to the Dutch ability to operate in a connecting and dynamic manner" and that the future of the Dutch position within the EU could "not be seen separately from Britain's departure in 2019" (Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2019). With regard to the current MFF discussions, the Dutch government was argued to have an important role in preventing "an unjustified high bill for

other member states" as a result of Britain's expected withdrawal (Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2019). According to Peeperkorn (2019), "the time when [the Dutch] could simply hit the brakes is over", with the Dutch actively seeking to become the third most relevant country in the EU after France and Germany. The data suggest that, despite the content of the Dutch position remaining unchanged, the Dutch have aimed to become a more leading voice among MS in light of Britain's departure.

5.2 Change of Dutch means?

Several changes can be identified within the Dutch performance. On one hand, the Dutch seem to have enhanced cooperation with traditional allies such as the Benelux countries. Despite Belgium and Luxembourg being historically less conservative than the Dutch with regard to economic and financial affairs (Ruse, 2013, p. 12), a common position laying out a vision on the future of Europe in February 2017 included calls for a more "competitive Eurozone", a Union focussing "on its core priorities" and ensuring to "spend its financial resources accordingly" (Michel, Rutte, & Bettel, 2017). The Benelux+ format, established by the Benelux countries as a platform to exchange views with other MS (Ruse, 2013, pp. 12-13), was also put into practice on 6 September 2018. In a meeting with French President Macron, the four countries found common ground on increasing funding from the Union's budget to the EU's external borders and coupling funds to the relocation of refugees, a position which many CEEC have objected to (De Morgen, 2018). A strong focus, however, can be identified towards Northern EU MS. In June 2017, Rutte held a meeting with former Irish Taoiseach Kenny and Danish PM Ramsussen where he argued that there had to be an understanding that, as a result of Britain's departure, some MS "are impacted even more than some of the others" and stating that three leaders were seeking ways to have their interests "reflected in the ground rules being set out by the European Council" (Minihan, 2017). In March 2018, the Dutch drafted a common position on the EMU with the so-called 'Hanseatic League Group' (HLG), including Ireland, the Baltic countries and the Nordic EU MS. The letter requested other MS to pursue "structural reforms" and underlined the need for measures "to reflect the budgetary constraints of the future EU-budget" (Rijksoverheid - Dutch Government, 2018).

The creation of the HLG has been regarded as a means to (partly) replace the UK as the leading liberal-minded MS (The Economist, 2018) with the Dutch "leading the opponent group" (Herszenhorn & De la Baume, 2018). Although Kuusik and Raik (2018) and Korteweg (2018) question the impact the alliance can make, considering among others the fact that several of these MS are themselves net-contributors, and have therefore often different interests, there seems to be sufficient interest towards a strong cooperation with the Dutch. While Irish Tánaiste Simon Coveney viewed the countries as "valuable allies" in, among others, "reforming economic and monetary union" (Coveney, 2018), Löfven (2015) acknowledged the relevance of the Netherlands as an influential MS next to the larger ones. In the 2019 State of the EU, the Dutch government stated that it would, among others, 'upgrade'

its diplomatic offices in EU MS and position more Dutch personnel at key EU positions, the measures being seen as “necessary to maintain a geographic balance” (Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2019). Janning (2018) acknowledges as well the potential of the Dutch by stating that “everyone thinks that Netherlands is the most leading among the affluent seven” and that the Dutch can bring different dimensions within EU-decision making together through their dense network. Although the Dutch identity on fiscal prudence seems to have remained unchanged, the Netherlands appears to have become a stronger voice within the current MFF discussions.

5.3 Change of Swedish beliefs?

Löfven's appeals to the EU putting the social perspective high on agenda" (Sveriges Radio, 2016) and his remarks in his 2017 Uppsala speech, arguing that "Sweden should have influence over decisions that affect [it]" (Löfven, 2017) indicate a strong desire to become a more leading voice in the discussions on a future EU, especially with regards to social issues. However, these views do no differ greatly from those discussed in the literature review. The creation of "more and better jobs", argued by Löfven in the aftermath of the Brexit-referendum (Sveriges Radio, 2016) has been evidenced as well in the country's 2001 Presidency programme where "[f]ull employment, economic growth and social cohesion" were regarded as "the EU's most important economic and social objectives and […] a top priority issue for the Swedish Presidency" (Europa Facile, 2001). Again, during its 2009 Presidency, some of Sweden's main aims were to introduce "measures that keep unemployment down, promote more labour force participation, and reduce labour market exclusion" (Government Offices of Sweden, 2010).

5.4 Change of Swedish means?

Discussions on Britain's withdrawal seem to have had a general impact on Sweden's performance within the EU. For example, De Gruyter (2018) mentions that Swedish officials are "sounding out colleagues they have hardly ever spoken to before" and that the country is aiming to establish a closer cooperation with the rest of the MS, as reflected through its aims to join the European Banking Union. These aims seem to be present as well within the country's performance on EU employment policy. Two main initiatives of the Löfven government have been the revision of the Posted Workers Directive, aiming to establish a more level playing field between workers from Western and Eastern MS, and the organisation of a Social Summit in Gothenburg, where the Swedish government aimed to foster discussions on several employment initiatives. Defining the Directive as "a Swedish initiative", Löfven stated that "[e]qual pay for equal work must apply to everyone – both in Sweden and in the rest of the EU" and that the Swedish government "has worked hard from day one to put these issues higher up on the EU agenda" (Löfven, 2017). A second major development within EU employment policy has been the organisation of the Social Summit, which can be seen as further evidence of the strong aim of the Swedish government to lead discussions on EU employment policy. According to Löfven, the Summit would mark "the first time that key stakeholders gather to jointly give their views on the way forward" and "Europe's leaders [coming] to Gothenburg to put decent work even higher up on the EU agenda" (Löfven, 2017).

However, initiatives for a more social Europe were already planned before the referendum on Britain's EU membership. In September 2015, when presenting to the Riskdag the new government's policies, Löfven argued for "ambitious" employment goals to be achieved, including measures to make

the country's unemployment rate "the lowest in the EU by 2020" (Löfven, 2015). To continue, in his 2016 March speech at the EP plenary week in Strasbourg, Löfven promoted the 2017 Social Summit and once again reiterated the need for more progress to be achieved within the fields of social and employment policy (Löfven, 2016). In his speech, he asked EU officials to "continue onwards and upwards" and "come together for a summit in Sweden in 2017, and draw up a strategy to move the idea of a social Europe forward". Not only have the Swedish beliefs thus remained mostly unchanged, but the country's means of pursuing its role within employment policy dot not seem to have been influenced by Britain's decision to leave the EU.

5.5 Hypothesis

If the Dutch role within the MFF has shifted, while the Swedish one has not, what explains this dichotomy? As outlined in the literature review, there are several aspects that could be examined in order to define differences in role change, but this research will focus on the salience of the issues, the external political support the countries have enjoyed and the domestic pressures that constrain the countries' influence.

5.5.1 Salience

In the Dutch case, there seems to be sufficient reason to believe that the MFF is currently a very salient issue within EU politics, not least for the very simple and evident reason that the current budget is running out. For many Northern MS, including the Netherlands, increased contributions to the EU budget seem to be a primary source of concern in the discussions on the future of the EU. This has been evidenced, for example, through a visit by the Irish and Danish PM's in The Hague in April 2017, with Rutte singling out the three countries by stating that "some were facing more difficulties than others as a result of Brexit" (Minihan, 2017). Equally, Swedish diplomats have argued that Britain's pending departure has left Sweden "orphaned" and that with "the driving force among the nine non-euro countries" leaving the EU, the country would establish new alliances in order to continue to exert influence within the eurozone (Taylor, 2018). The discussions on the 2021-2027 MMF seem to be, therefore, centrally placed within the overall discussions on how the EU will continue after Britain's pending departure.

According to the Secretary General of the EP, Klaus Welle (2018) a possible British withdrawal from the EU means that the EU will be "losing capacity", but also progressing towards a different EU. Among scholars, there seems to be a strong belief that a British withdrawal from the EU will result in a stronger social policy, as a MS being "strongly critical of the development of rights in the area of social security" (Sjögren, 2017) will be leaving the EU, with an opportunity thus arising to strengthen the Union's social dimension (Petříček, 2018). From the perspective of the MS, social and employment issues have generally been perceived as priority issues for the future of the EU. For example, in his meeting with Löfven in September 2016, Tusk mentioned "the fears of globalisation" as some of the main issues to be dealt with in a post-Brexit EU (Tusk, 2016). Equally, the 2016 Bratislava Declaration, signed by the leaders of the 27 remaining MS, identified "social insecurity" among citizens and "fighting youth unemployment" as relevant issues to be dealt with in order to regain trust from EU citizens (Council of the EU, 2016). Furthermore, in the discussions on the 2017 Rome Declaration, paving a way forward for a post-Brexit EU, a "need for the EU to show it can improve the lives of its citizens" was argued to have been a central issue for "champions of the social dimension – principally center-left governments in Sweden, Italy and Malta" (Cooper, 2017). Thus, the data suggest that strengthening

employment policy within the EU has been a salient issue among many leaders. As both issues enjoy significant salience, it is not expected that this factor will have negatively impacted either of the two MS.

5.5.2 Political support

With the UK's decision to leave the EU, there seems to be a larger interest in a strategic alliance with the Netherlands within 2021-2027 MFF discussions. Several authors argue that, in light of the Brexit discussions, a "realignment" is occurring within EU decision-making (De Gruyter, 2018), where discussions on the future of the Union are organised first in "constellations and so-called likeminded groups" (Sjögren, 2017), "then between them, and later, formally in the EU forum" (Ogrodnik, 2017). According to Kuusik and Raik (2018), a British withdrawal from the EU would result in a loss of leadership for smaller MS with an interest in reducing EU spending and modernising the Union's budget. Furthermore, many non-eurozone MS, such as Denmark and Sweden, seem to be strongly concerned by moves to advance economic and monetary integration among eurozone members, such as the aims of Juncker and Eurogroup President Mário Centeno to create fiscal instruments to prevent major shocks within the eurozone (Khan, 2018). In Sweden's case, these concerns have not only been addressed by Sjögren (2017, p. 39), who warns that such initiatives could lead to Sweden becoming more isolated from the eurozone MS, but are also evidenced through Löfven's Uppsala speech, in which he criticizes moves to create an "A team" and "B team" and states that "[t]hose participating in the areas of cooperation, such as the euro area, must show consideration for us all" (Löfven, 2017).

According to a study conducted by the Swedish Institute for European Policy Studies (SIEPS), "[m]any of the euro countries, such as Germany, the Netherlands and Estonia, are anxious not to alienate the outsider countries" (SIEPS, 2017, p. 64). Having the fifth largest economy among the EU MS and being strongly integrated in most of the existing EU frameworks (Janning, 2016), the Dutch seem to have an opportunity to lead the HLG within the budgetary discussions. The ability of smaller MS to successfully influence larger MS has been questioned, however. For example, Schout argues that larger MS are able to divide smaller MS that oppose larger contributions by offering them caveats tailored to their interests, while Chang (2006) states that smaller MS are generally reluctant to offer strong opposition against larger MS, since their support might be needed in other policy areas. In addition, Schout (2017) argues that the HLG is neither large enough to make an impact, since most of the countries have a rather small population and economic size, nor does it provide a stable coalition, as each country has significantly different interests. Nevertheless, it seems that the HLG has in fact been able to impact the MFF discussions, with the cooperation making a successful attempt in blocking a Franco-German proposal for a eurozone budget with strong financial transfers (Reiermann & Müller,

2018) and French officials perceiving the cooperation as a threat to French economic and financial policy (Khan, 2018).

On the contrary, in the case of Sweden, it is questionable whether the strengthening of the Union's employment dimension has enjoyed sufficient support among MS. Although Löfven regarded fighting unemployment as one the Union's main priorities in his discussions with Tusk (Sveriges Radio, 2016), the Bratislava Declaration made only a general a reference to economic security (Tusk, 2016). As Crespy (2017) argues, considering that social democratic governments in the EU have been generally outnumbered by liberal and conservative ones, "the appetite for far-reaching social progress might not be large, let alone for doing this at EU level". To continue, Hantrais argues that "it seems doubtful that a so-called 'Brexit' will result in a rush of new EU social legislation" as such legislation will "continue to be restrained by the widespread support for the principle of subsidiarity with respect to national social protection systems" (Hantrais, 2017, p. 22). According to Swedish centre-right MEP Gunnar Hökmark (2017), the "symbolic" attempts of the Swedish government to make social models across the EU more similar to the Swedish ones are bound to fail "due to different levels of prosperity and different priorities". The European debt crisis seems to have strengthened this diversity in interests, with a widening gap in social standards between Northern MS and crisis-ridden ones (Seikel, 2016; Crespy, 2017).

Furthermore, Hantrais criticises the perception that a British absence from EU decision-making structures will pave the way for further cooperation on EU employment policy. Firstly, she stresses that other MS have been equally critical of initiatives to strengthen this area at the EU level, as evidenced by the exclusion of harmonisation measures from the TFEU which was, beside the UK, also blocked by other MS (Hantrais, 2017). Secondly, she believes that a loss of UK officials within several organisations dealing with social affairs, such as the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) might actually result in a loss of staunch social defenders as "UK participants have been forceful in promoting and defending the achievements of EU social law, often in conflict with their national government" (Hantrais, 2017, p. 22). Thus, although Britain's pending withdrawal is described as an opportunity to move forward, there seems to be a strong incoherence among welfare systems in the EU MS and strong preferences to maintain national competences, all of which seem to impede progress. As such, the thesis expects that Swedish officials will not be as successful in gaining sufficient support for their initiatives as the Dutch will.

5.5.3 Domestic developments

According to Levy, "[a]ctors may learn from experience but be prevented by domestic, economic, or bureaucratic constraints from implementing their preferred policies based on what they have learned" (Levy, 1994, p. 290). In the Dutch case, domestic developments do not appear to constrain the country's behaviour. Firstly, the literature review has already shown that economic and financial interests have been historically a central part of the Dutch identity within the EU. Not only have the Dutch aimed to create an EU that is built on sound fiscal policies and a modernised budget, but the country's membership has been viewed as well as a predominantly economic matter (Korteweg, 2017). In addition, the opposition of the Dutch government towards larger Dutch contributions to the Union's budget seems to not only be strongly supported by the Dutch general public, with only 37% supporting a larger budget (European Commission, 2017), but De Boer (2018) also suggests that Dutch officials have become critical of the EU as a means to appease Dutch voters. The current aims of the Netherlands to lead a group of like-minded countries and secure a more restrained budget should enjoy support from the majority of political parties and the Dutch citizens.

In the Swedish case, several domestic issues are expected to constrain the country's role. One of the most challenging issues for Sweden's position within EU employment policy seems to be the preservation of the Swedish welfare model. In 2013, the European Court of Justice (ECJ) ruled that Latvian construction workers were not required to become part of a collective agreement with the Swedish Building Worker's Union, with the Latvian construction company 'Laval' being therefore able to provide different social standards to its employees with regard to the Swedish ones (LO, 2013). As discussed in the literature review, the preservation of the Swedish welfare model has formed a central part of Sweden's national and international identity. According to Von Sydow, the Swedish Social Democrats and Trade Unions have worked actively on promoting the cause for a Social Protocol in the EU as a result of the Laval Case judgement (Von Sydow, 2016), with Löfven advocating a "Social Europe", where "workers never are forced to compete against each other through lower wages or poorer working conditions" (Löfven, 2016). Although this could reflect a strong support for the Swedish government for fostering a coordination of employment policies, it seems that Sweden is locked in a political dilemma. While left-wing parties pressure the government to ensure a stronger social policy, right-wing parties seem to be firmly against such initiatives (Von Sydow, 2016). And although Löfven stressed that the Swedish initiatives were not aimed at curbing national competences (Löfven, 2015), Schillinger (2015) argues that it is in fact a lack of "legal and structural" means within the Union's social dimension that are partly to blame for a limited progress within the area. Thus, the research expects that the Dutch position will be strengthened by domestic developments yet in contrast, the Swedish

one will be constrained by them. In the following sections, the thesis aims to examine if these factors are indeed responsible for a change in identity.

6. Results

As outlined in the previous section, although both issues are expected to enjoy significant salience among EU policy makers, the Dutch position is expected to enjoy stronger support from MS and to be less constrained by domestic developments. Further data has been collected to evaluate these findings. In particular, interviews with Dutch and Swedish officials suggest different results for one of the hypotheses.

6.1 Salience

In the previous section, it was argued that the Dutch position has been strengthened due to the MFF enjoying significant salience among EU policy makers. The findings have been in line with this expectation. A Dutch diplomat working on the MFF underlined the impact of Britain's withdrawal on the MFF by stating that "with the Brits not being around, being one of [the Netherlands'] biggest allies, and the Netherlands remaining as one the largest net-payers, that brings the conversation [on the 2021-2027 MFF] indeed into a different perspective" (Anonymous, Interview with Dutch Representative, 2019). In particular, the UK was referred to as "a close ally […] within the MFF", having supported the Dutch position in "advocating for a smaller EU budget and taking into account the position of net-payers". Similarly, for the rest of the EU, the discussions on how the future MFF will take form seemed to have shifted power relations among MS. According to the diplomat "Brexit has really impacted the status quo", where a "traditional north-south dividing line, which you would normally have in mind, is not really around" and with MS realising that "they have new roles and that they can apply new strategies" (Anonymous, Interview with Dutch Representative, 2019). This impact was also acknowledged by a Swedish diplomat working on employment policy, who argued that "[o]ne area where Britain's pending departure is really felt is the MFF […] because Brexit will leave a large gap in spending and Sweden is now one of the few countries left advocating for a smaller budget" (Anonymous, Interview with Swedish Representative, 2019). Furthermore, a Swedish interest group official stated that ""Britain's departure would have a big impact on the Swedish position as a non-eurozone member state" (Anonymous, Interview with Swedish Interest Group, 2019).

Views among EU policy-makers seemed to underline those of the interviewees. For example, Ekaterina Zaharieva, Bulgarian Minister of Foreign Affairs and deputy PM for Judicial Reform during the 2018 Bulgarian Council Presidency, mentioned that "[t]he EU budget is a vital building block for the future of Europe, and an expression of our values and aspirations" (Council of the European Union, 2018). To continue, in its proposal for a future budget, the EC stated that "[t]his is a pivotal moment for our Union" and "[a] time to show unequivocally that the Union is ready to back up its words with the actions needed to deliver on our common vision". In addition, the EC argued that "[t]he departure of an important contributor to the EU budget will have a financial impact and the future Financial

Framework must take account of that" (European Commission, 2018). Even among the largest two MS, namely France and Germany, the MFF has been a salient issue, as both MS have been preoccupied by the discussions on a future EU budget, aiming to create a separate eurozone budget in order to enhance economic convergence (Martin, 2018). Thus, the MFF did not only receive considerate attention from the Netherlands and the other MS, but was in general a salient issue among EU institutions precisely because it concerned the continuation of the Union's operations.

This stands in sharp contrast to what was identified for the Swedish case. Firstly, in all three interviews conducted with Swedish diplomats, there was no data to suggest that the EC or the MS regarded employment policy as a main priority. For example, one interviewee argued that although the current EC "took the initiative for more social policies and laws than many Commissions before her […] most of the social proposals of the Commission came late in the game" and they still "do not address the growing inequalities within and between European member states fully and properly" (Anonymous, Interview with MEP, 2018). To continue, a Swedish diplomat argued that when it comes to employment policy, there "are arguably no major effects" (Anonymous, Interview with Swedish Representative, 2019) with the Swedish interest group official suggesting that whether employment policy was a priority depended on a "national perspective", as for "countries that are doing economically well, like Sweden and the Netherlands, social issues are not as pressing as for member states which have been hit harder by the financial crisis" (Anonymous, Interview with Swedish Interest Group, 2019). This was very different from the case of the MFF where "positions are changing because the numbers are changing as a result of the Brits leaving" (Anonymous, Interview with Dutch Representative, 2019).

A low commitment towards strengthening the Union's employment policy was evidenced by the priorities EU leaders set for the future of the EU. For example, Rutte himself has not considered the strengthening of EU employment policy as a priority and has refused any fiscal transfers within the MFF on areas such as cohesion policy, which benefit socially vulnerable MS in Eastern and Southern Europe (Rutte, 2018). These competing interests have been reflected through the words of the Italian Social Democrats, arguing that "Europe must change: Jobs, development and growth must be put back at the heart of it" (Borrelli, 2019) and former Czech PM Bohulsav Sobotka, regarding "the huge differences in living standards in individual parts of the EU" as a "fundamental issue" (Murphy, 2017). However, even for the most influential MS, employment policy did not seem to be a high priority, with Merkel's absence from the Social Summit being regarded by Portuguese MEP Maria Rodrigues, as a negligence towards "the social dimension of the European project" (Herszenhorn, 2017). Thus, contrary to what was expected, employment policy has not been a high priority among EU decision-makers, while discussions on the MFF have received considerate attention by the EC and all the MS.

These differences in salience have eventually led to different levels of support from other MS, which shall be discussed in the following section.

6.2 Political support

The second hypothesis suggested that the Dutch role would be strengthened due to a stronger support for the Dutch position from other MS. Further data underlined this expectation. To begin with, in an interview with Dutch national broadcaster NOS, Hoekstra (2019) emphasised the strong cooperation between the Netherlands and the rest of the HLG countries. His view was supported by the Lithuanian Finance Minister Vilius Sapoka, who seemed to welcome the creation of the HLG and the Dutch leadership as a means for small MS to maintain influence over budgetary issues (NOS, 2019). However, academic researchers at the SIEPS argued that in practice, the six Nordic and Baltic MS (NB6) did not share Dutch aims to lead their countries due to their strong preference for a sense of quality among them (SIEPS, 2017). Similarly, Kuusik and Raik (2018) argue that "there is an underlying suspicion and caution among the Nordic-Baltic countries towards Dutch leadership, just as there was towards UK leadership". Secondly, the data did not provide a clear case for how the cooperation should be defined. While the Baltic and Nordic MS seemed to view the cooperation as purely issue-driven (SIEPS, 2017), Hoekstra regarded the HLG as a third preferred partner for the Dutch, along with Germany and France (NOS, 2019). Lastly, although it was suggested previously that non-eurozone MS would actively look to eurozone MS for more inclusion, the Dutch diplomat disagreed with this view. With regard to the issue of "a Union of two speeds", he argued that "when talking about the budget, this is not really an issue" and that most discussions are "held within the 27" (Anonymous, Interview with Dutch Representative, 2019).

Nevertheless, further data suggested that the Dutch have, through support from the HLG, become indeed a leading voice within the MFF discussions. According to Moerland (2018) the December 2018 Council Summit conclusions, where the Dutch used the HLG to prevent the establishment of a eurozone budget, could be seen as a victory for the Dutch and the rest of the HLG, as the French demands for common eurozone budget were greatly watered down. This view was supported as well by the Dutch diplomat, who argued that "Sweden and Denmark being as well net-contributors, […] are of course looking at [the Netherlands] to act together" (Anonymous, Interview with Dutch Representative, 2019). Among others, the Dutch have held meetings with Latvian officials in exploring ways to "form an alliance, not only within the Hanze group, but also on the broader level" (Anonymous, Interview with Dutch Representative, 2019). Thus, a development seemed to have taken place, in which the Dutch gained a stronger role in the MFF discussions while other MS aimed to secure their interests through the Dutch role.

In the Swedish case, the hypothesis expected a strong resistance towards aims to further coordinate national employment policies, in spite of Britain's pending withdrawal. This resistance was evidenced through the position of several national leaders. For example, with regard to the

organisation of the ESPR, Danish leader Lars Løkke Rasmussen strongly argued against the creation of "new legal rights or obligations" and stressed that "the main competence for designing labor markets and social systems should remain with national governments" (Rasmussen, 2017). In practice, such attitudes resulted in serious obstacles for the Swedish initiatives. For example, Sweden's aim to review the Posted Workers Directive received strong opposition from 11 parliaments, all but one from CEEC, viewing the Directive as negative to their economic development (European Commission, 2018). According to the Swedish diplomat, Swedish Employment Minister Ylva Johansson took significant efforts to convince several governments in CEE to support the initiative. In the case of the UK, no sufficient evidence was found to clarify Britain's role. Although the Swedish diplomat argued that "[t]he UK has never really opposed any Swedish initiatives because Sweden and the UK have had in general similar views with regard to how social policy should be framed in the EU context" (Anonymous, Interview with Swedish Representative, 2019) the Swedish interest group representative stated that while "Sweden and the UK might have voted similarly in Council voting", Swedish efforts have been mainly aimed at the "wording of a directive, rather than an intrinsic agreement on the scope of the directive" (Anonymous, Interview with Swedish Interest Group, 2019).

Secondly, considerate differences between national welfare systems seemed to challenge Sweden's ability to establish coalitions with other MS. Although Germany was regarded as a close partner within employment policy, cooperation between the two countries was difficult owing to the "large differences between the two with regard to their social models" (Anonymous, Interview with Swedish Representative, 2019). For example, in the case of minimum wages, the Swedish position was quite different from the German one, "as the latter's model is based on a minimum wage while the former is based on the power of actors to bargain an agreement" (Anonymous, Interview with Swedish Representative, 2019). Furthermore, the unique nature of the Swedish welfare model also challenged cooperation with MS with similar models. According to the Swedish diplomat, "cooperation with Denmark, a country that has a similar social model to the Swedish one, was not close, since the current Danish government is a right-wing one and not very forthcoming to social and employment initiatives from the Swedish government". In addition, in the Swedish case, "[e]mployment policy was very much promoted due to the fact that a left-wing government was in power" (Anonymous, Interview with Swedish Representative, 2019). These findings suggest that the success for a MS may not be as much dependent on the nature of a country's welfare models but rather on national political affiliations.

However, "[r]egional differences are as well very relevant, as seen by the predominantly East-West division on the labour mobility package" and "a tendency among trade unions in Europe, predominantly in the East and South, to want more 'social' integration due to the economic difficulties they face". According to the interest group representative, this was evidenced through "a lack of

capacity among many social partners in Europe in being able to take the needed responsibility and effectively impact social policies in their countries" with "a strong need, according to the Unions, to change this in order to achieve more progress" (Anonymous, Interview with Swedish Interest Group, 2019). However, while the Swedish government itself was firm on the responsibility for change lying "at the member state level" (Anonymous, Interview with Swedish Representative, 2019), a study conducted by Casey and Gold (2005) suggested that the OMC has not provided sufficient change to the Union's employment dimension. Thus, as Von Sydöw (2016) argues, Swedish hopes that "other member states would converge towards a Nordic model of high levels of social protection, active labour market policies and investment in education" have not been realised. This section reflected on one hand a changing dynamic among MS and their positions within the MFF, especially in the Dutch case. On the other hand, a fear of loss of national competences and large differences among EU MS impeded a stronger coordination of employment policies at the EU level.

6.3 Domestic constraints

As outlined in the previous sections of this research, domestic developments may strengthen or constrain the role of MS. A focus on domestic support for the roles both countries have aimed to pursue within respectively the MFF and employment policy provided different findings for both countries.

6.3.1 Domestic political support

One of the most profound domestic changes that occurred in the Dutch case was a shift in views among Dutch parties on EU integration. As discussed previously, Dutch attitudes towards EU politics have been consistently influenced by economic and financial issues, especially with regard to how much the Dutch should financially contribute to the EU. This was further underlined by the interviewed Dutch diplomat, who argued that Dutch parties were in general strongly critical of further contributions to the Union's budget, viewing the MFF discussions predominantly as "a zero-sum game" (Anonymous, Interview with Dutch Representative, 2019). However, Britain's pending withdrawal did not only change attitudes towards EU integration at the governmental level, but also among the rest of the Dutch political parties. According to the diplomat, even the most critical parties "are changing their wording in how to approach the EU" with a realisation having occurred on "what the added value of the EU is for the Netherlands" and how much the country gains "from the internal market and our open borders". In addition, while several Dutch parties were previously openly flirting with the possibility of a so-called 'Nexit', the interviewee argued that with such questions were "out of the political arena at the moment in The Hague" as "parties that were firstly asking for a Nexit have completely come back to this" (Anonymous, Interview with Dutch Representative, 2019).

A brief look at the political parties in the Netherlands, however, provided a different picture. Besides the far-right Partij voor de Vrijheid (PVV), led by Geert Wilders, a second, newly created party, Forum voor Democratie (FvD), has openly discussed during Dutch debates its willingness to lead the Netherlands to a withdrawal from the EU (Dirks, 2019). On the other hand, traditional parties that were once strong critics of EU integration seemed to have indeed toned down Eurosceptic rhetoric. This was mostly evidenced through position changes among the governing liberal (VVD) and Christian democrat (CDA) parties, which now focussed on establishing a strong European cooperation while being once very critical of such advances. Most importantly, many of the Dutch government's aims within the MFF seem to have found strong political support, with the CDA, once a fervent defender of maintaining the status quo on agricultural funds, offering its support to modernising the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) (De Boer, 2019). According to one of our interviewees, "even for the most pro-EU political party it is difficult to come back to the Hague after a long round of negotiations and say that you've lost and that the Netherlands will have to pay more" (Anonymous, Interview with Dutch

Representative, 2019). As such, a strong domestic uniformity was evidenced on the Dutch position on the MFF.

Such strong domestic support seemed to be absent in the Swedish case. To begin with, although the Löfven government has had high ambitions for a change of employment policy at both the domestic and EU level, the government lacked strong cross-party support for its position. This was evidenced, for example, through the creation of a European Labour Authority (ELA), which received not only strong opposition from countries such as Denmark, but also from several parties within the Swedish parliament, the Riksdag, which opposed such measures out of fear for a deterioration of the Swedish welfare model (Ahlberg, 2018). According to one of our interviewees, the Swedish Liberals initially offered support towards the Löfven government for the creation of the ELA; however, after this support was withdrawn, the coalition of Social Democrats and Greens could no longer support the proposal, despite their views that it "would have a good impact on Europe as a whole". The "domestic opposition" towards several employment initiatives was argued to be "too strong", leading eventually to the Riksdag raising a yellow card on the ELA and the Transparency Directive. A similar case was evidenced in the case of the EPSR and the Social Summit, with right-wing parties being "quite critical" of the initiatives proposed by the Löfven government (Anonymous, Interview with Swedish Interest Group, 2019).

Such opposition was also present among other Swedish domestic actors. For example, although the Swedish Trade Union Confederation (LO) did not necessarily object to a more supportive role for the EU on national employment policies (LO Sweden, 2017), both the LO and the Confederation of Swedish Enterprise, two of the most influential social partners, raised strong concerns over the effects that initiatives such as the Directive on Working Conditions would have on the Swedish welfare model (Rudeberg, 2017; Ahlberg, 2018; Anonymous, Interview with Swedish Interest Group, 2019). An effort by the Commission to change the voting procedure in several areas from unanimity to qualified majority voting (QMV) also received criticism from the Swedish unions, as they believed that the "member states should remain in control of these aspects" (Anonymous, Interview with Swedish Interest Group, 2019). Furthermore, support for further transfers of competences from the national to the EU level within social and employment policy were among the lowest in the Nordic MS, while interestingly, support for such transfer of competences was found to be much higher among UK citizens (European Commission, 2015). Therefore, as argued by Hantrais, views of the UK being the foremost obstacle towards a more social Europe might indeed need to be revisited.

6.3.2 The Swedish welfare model

In line with what was expected in the hypothesis, Sweden's welfare model was influenced greatly by its position on employment policy. According to the Swedish interest group representative,

"employment and labour market policies have always been and continue to be an issue due to the way that the Swedish labour model is structured" (Anonymous, Interview with Swedish Interest Group, 2019). The large influence the Swedish welfare model has had on Sweden's position has not only been mentioned by the MEP and the two Swedish officials (Anonymous, Interview with Swedish Representative, 2019; Anonymous, Interview with Swedish Interest Group, 2019; Anonymous, Interview with MEP, 2018), but the interest group representative explained that "[f]rom the beginning of Sweden's accession process, it was very relevant for the country to receive guarantees that it would still be able to maintain its labour market policies". In fact, it was argued that "[t]he strong focus on EU employment policy by the former Löfven government has indeed been present prior to the Brexit referendum" and that "Swedish concerns on this actually go back to the Laval case, in which the Court of Justice ruled in favour of a free market policy over the provisions of the Swedish labour market model" (Anonymous, Interview with Swedish Interest Group, 2019). As the Swedish diplomat argues, "[t]he bottom line is that there is strong agreement on the preservation of the Swedish labour model as it stands today and that EU membership should not come at a cost of it" (Anonymous, Interview with Swedish Representative, 2019).

The Swedish position within employment policy was found to rest on ensuring that initiatives did not "interfere with Swedish labour market policies in a negative way", coupled with an "individual responsibility of member states to use [existing] tools and make progress" (Anonymous, Interview with Swedish Representative, 2019). This approach was, however, found to challenge Sweden's influence. According to the interviewed MEP, "especially when it comes to wage policies, the Swedish system differs so much from the rest of Europe that the Swedish position can sometimes be regarded as an obstacle for a European approach on social issues too". As she continued, Swedish governments would sometimes block "European initiatives out of fear of losing their higher social standards in their welfare system or concluded in collective bargaining" (Anonymous, Interview with MEP, 2018). Sweden's engagement on several initiatives underlined this view, as "[d]iscussions on wages and income were in general challenging, but those aimed specifically at setting a minimum wage were really problematic, since such a move would undermine the Swedish collective bargaining model" (Anonymous, Interview with Swedish Representative, 2019). As has been expected, although the Dutch position was strengthened because of broad domestic support for its positon, Sweden seems to be locked in a political dilemma, where it aims on one hand to strengthen the Union's social dimensions but faces significant challenges in preserving its own welfare model by doing so.

Discussion

This thesis has suggested that, after Britain's decision to leave the EU, the Netherlands and Sweden have developed differently within respectively the areas of the MFF and employment policy. By using role theory as a theoretical framework, the research identified the Netherlands as a new leader within the budgetary discussions, hence adopting a new identity, while no specific change was identified in the Swedish case. This development was attributed to the difference in salience the issues enjoyed, the political support both countries received and the domestic issues that either constrained or strengthened their roles. The findings suggested that the influence of smaller MS, like the Netherlands and Sweden, depended on the salience of an issue they maintained as a priority. As has been clear in the Dutch case, the MFF has been a relevant issue across all MS and EU institutions, as without an agreement, the EU would not be able to function properly. On the other hand, employment issues have generally not been considered a high priority and, even though the EC has aimed to strengthen cooperation in this area, its efforts have been criticised for a lack of effectiveness. This is an interesting development, since the EU is not only criticised for being too market-driven (Jongerius, 2015; Crespy, 2017; Plomien, 2018) but a 2018 Eurobarometer survey has found that large majorities of EU citizens support a harmonisation of wages (71%) and the creation of minimum social standards (66%) (European Commission, 2018). Although citizens in predominantly Northern EU MS are less supportive of such aims, a stronger coordination of national employment policies may be inevitable in the long-term.

Secondly, in the absence of the UK, it has been much easier for the Netherlands to become a leading voice within the current MFF discussions, since a majority of Northern EU MS, regardless of political affiliations, shares its position. Although the HLG does not appear to be a structured alliance yet, Janning (2018) argues that if the Netherlands and other like-minded smaller MS "would get together and become interested in coordinating their positions, they would immediately generate interest" as together, these countries "have a GDP higher than that of France and pay more into the EU budget than France does". On the contrary, when it comes to employment policy, EU leaders have been less willing to support several Swedish initiatives due to a fear of loss of national sovereignty and their diverse national interests. This low commitment is striking considering that, in 2015, a majority of British citizens criticised the EU for failing to tackle social issues sufficiently (European Commission, 2015). As Hantrais (2017) argues "social concerns played a role in determining the UK electorate's vote to leave the EU, particularly among the more disadvantaged socio-economic categories" (p. 22). Thirdly, a stronger uniformity of positions has been present in the Netherlands on the Dutch position towards the MFF. All political parties, from left to right, seem to be critical of any aims to increase the Dutch contributions to the Union's budget. The Swedish case provides, however, a more mixed view.

Although the centre-left government has been much more open to employment initiatives, as a minority government, it has been constrained by opposition from right-wing parties. Furthermore, "Sweden stands in a rather ambiguous position, where it wants a stronger social Europe but aims at the same time to keep its social model as it has been before" (Anonymous, Interview with Swedish Interest Group, 2019). Such an ambiguity is problematic for a country that, as Von Sydow argues, aims to motivate other countries to adjust to its social standards (Von Sydow, 2016).

During the research, other areas of interest were found which deserve further discussion. According to Taylor (2018) "[r]eal power in the EU springs from the ability to block unwelcome measures" as a blocking minority "gives you a voice in negotiations with Europe's big players". This is as well supported by Warntjen (2017), who contradicts previous studies and argues that blocking minorities do matter in influencing policy outcomes. While, employment policy relies mostly on policy coordination, with no sanctions for MS failing to meet targets, the MFF requires unanimity from all MS and therefore, a blocking minority may be successful enough in pressuring a majority to change its position. Such differences within policy areas may strongly affect the possibility of identity change for MS, especially for smaller ones. Furthermore, as Walker (1987) argues, studying leaders from far can be problematic for understanding accurately the motives behind their decisions. The interviews with the two Swedish officials suggested that the personalities of the Swedish government officials might have been a relevant factor of influence, with the Swedish diplomat arguing that Employment Minister Johnasson was "very comfortable in her role" and combined the "national and European dimensions of her job very well" (Anonymous, Interview with Swedish Representative, 2019). A research tailored to the leaders themselves and their engagement in EU affairs might thus provide a different understanding of the events discussed in this research.

To continue, a more comprehensive approach might have provided different results as well. The findings of the research were partly based on four interviews; however, a larger number of respondents might have provided more insights into the discussed issues. While a large survey may lack the insights provided by a qualitative research, it may be able to offer a more solid basis for the eventual findings. Furthermore, due to its limited scope, the study had to inevitably focus on a limited amount of aspects. Although salience, political support and domestic constraints seemed indeed to have contributed to the different developments in both cases, it would be relevant to examine other areas as well. For example, in her research on agriculture and internal market policies, Bailer finds that bargaining power resources differ between the two policy fields (Bailer, 2004, p. 751); however, more research is necessary into other policy areas in order to suggest whether such resources are indeed relevant. Thus, various areas exist which are suitable for further research.

Conclusion

This study has aimed to examine why the Netherlands and Sweden, as two smaller MS, have developed differently in the discussions on the future EU budget and EU employment policy. Britain's pending withdrawal from the EU seems to have set in motion strong debates on not only more traditional questions, such as more or less integration, but also on the future influence of smaller MS, with many of them fearing that the UK's absence will leave them powerless. For these states, the Union's post-Brexit future raises not only questions on whether their economic and social interests will remain intact, but whether they, as smaller MS, will continue to have a say on issues that will fundamentally affect their positions. Through the use of role theory and by collecting extracts on the roles of those countries prior to and after the UK's decision to leave the EU, the research was able to firstly identify how exactly the Dutch role within the MFF and the Swedish one within employment policy have changed. This has helped the thesis to establish three hypotheses on why this dichotomy between the two countries has occurred, focussing on the salience of the issues, the external support the countries have received for their positions and their domestic constraints.

Firstly, the research found that while MFF has become a high priority within the discussions on the future of the EU, employment policy has not. This was contrary to was expected previously, as both issues were expected to be highly prioritised among EU leaders. The second hypothesis expected that political support for the Dutch position within the MFF would be large, while on the contrary, the Swedish position would enjoy limited support. Indeed, the findings suggested that the Dutch government did not only receive much support from like-minded MS, but was also able to use this support to counter initiatives that were not in line with its interests. On the contrary, Swedish aims to advance employment policy did not receive an equally strong support from other MS. Lastly, it was expected that domestic developments would strengthen the Dutch role yet constrain the Swedish one. The findings suggested that, while the opposition of the Dutch government towards larger contributions found support across the wide political spectrum, the Swedish government has faced several domestic challenges, not only with regard to the structure of its welfare policy, but also due to a limited domestic support for its position. These developments have benefited the Netherlands, as a strong focus on their role within the 2021-2027 MFF discussions has allowed the country to take a more leading role; however, Sweden has not been able to succeed in prioritising employment policy further at the EU level.

One of the main insights this thesis has provided is that, even in event which is expected to offer a country a significant opportunity to impact EU policy, strong factors exist, either domestically or externally, which may prevent an increase in its influence. Although a strong focus rests on how the two leading EU MS, namely France and Germany, will shape the Union, and to what extent the financial

troubles of another large MS, namely Italy, will constrain EU integration, most smaller MS such as the Netherlands and Sweden have been deeply shaken by Britain's decision to leave the EU and have, as a result, been strongly motivated to defend their interests. Yet despite their efforts to influence the discussions on the Union's future and enhance their influence, the extent to which these countries have been able to impact their policy priorities is mixed. This thesis has suggested that, while the MFF is currently a main priority among EU leaders, the Union's approach to employment policy has arguably not enjoyed a similar level of prioritisation. As has been argued previously, this is striking since a large majority of EU citizens do wish to see a stronger EU role on social and employment issues at home. The impact this issue may have for the EU as a whole has been reflected through a growing disenchantment among a majority of British and other EU citizens on the Union's approach on social issues and their view that social and employment initiatives should be at the top of EU leaders' agenda in the discussions on the future of the EU. As such, a dichotomy seems to be existing between the priorities pursued by EU governments and those of their citizens.

A major question within Levy's article has been the examination of what elements may lead to political change. As the discussion has reflected, there are various factors of influence that could still be further explored. These could be aimed at the EU level, including the structure of different policy areas, or at the national level, focussing for example on the personal background of PM's and ministers. Although this thesis has made an attempt to make a limited yet valuable contribution to the existing literature on small MS and factors of influence, further research on the broad effects of Britain's pending departure could be significant in understanding the changing roles of smaller MS and their positions within different policy fields.

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