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**Immigration and Asylum on the agenda of the European Council:
Attention Dynamics in the run-up to the 2015 Refugee Crisis.**

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1 Introduction

1.1 *The Refugee Crisis and EU Immigration and Asylum Policy*

In the second half of 2015 the European Union (EU) was hit by a new crisis. It was a refugee crisis at its southern borders (Guiraudon, 2017, pp. 151-152; Campesi, 2018, p. 44; Geddes, 2018, pp. 120-121). The scale of the crisis was exemplified by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR, 2018) reporting that in total 1,78 million people entered the EU by crossing the Mediterranean Sea between January 2014 and March 2018 (Geddes, 2018, p. 121). Furthermore, according to the UNHCR (2018) more than 16.000 people were reported missing or dead in the same period crossing the Mediterranean Sea. During the summer and fall of 2015, media attention rose as the crisis at the southern borders of the EU continued (Guiraudon, 2017, p. 151). Especially, on the third of september 2015, when the media around the world showed, to the public, the picture of a three year old Kurdish boy laying dead on the beaches of Turkey (Guiraudon, 2017, p. 152). In the face of all the media attention the EU had to respond because clearly the Common European Asylum System (CEAS) could not cope with the scope of the crisis at hand (Campesi, 2018, pp. 44-45; Guiraudon, 2017, p. 153).

During such a crisis the European Council, consisting of all highest political leaders of EU member states gather to discuss and respond to such matter (European Council, 2015, p. 1). The conclusions of these gatherings are of major importance as the European Council has been steering the development of the EU since 1975, has been acting as an important policy entrepreneur and has been fulfilling its role as major agenda-setter in the EU political system (Alexandrova, Carammia & Timmermans., In Foret & Rittelmeyer, 2013, p. 53; Elias & Timmermans, 2014, p. 162; Alexandrova, Carammia, & Timmermans, 2012, p. 71).

During the refugee crisis the issues of immigration and asylum were bespoken in the European Council and the real problems of EU immigration and asylum policy became clear. CEAS seemed better designed to restrict the movement of those who were seeking refuge than to protect them from the war or persecution they were fleeing from (Campesi, 2018, p. 45). Furthermore, G. Campesi points in his research to the fact that: 'Such a policy model [CEAS] was untenable both from a legal and a political point of view, and the signs of crisis had already emerged well before 2015' (Campesi, 2018, p. 45). Additionally, from an operational standpoint the Dublin agreement, that is part of the CEAS, was putting tremendous pressure on Italy and Greece because it required asylum seekers to apply for asylum in the first country of entry (Geddes, 2018, p. 124). Lastly, according to the Dublin Agreement, refugees could be sent back

to their first country of entry, often Greece or Italy. However, according to the European Court of Human Rights and the European court of Justice this was in breach of the fundamental human rights (Guiraudon, 2017, p. 154). Authors have clearly argued that the Common European Asylum System and EU immigration and asylum policy was unable to cope with the rising numbers of asylum seekers. This point of view is also adopted by Guiraudon (2017) as he builds in his artikel on the concept of a *'focussing event'* (Guiraudon, 2017, p. 152). The media attention for the refugee crisis formed a *'focussing event'* that expanded the scope of the debate on the issue beyond the national- and EU institutions dealing with issues on immigration and asylum to the general public (Guiraudon, 2017, pp. 152-153). Such major attention is often seen as a precondition to make policy change happen (True, Jones, & Baumgartner., In Sabatier, 2007, p. 156). This makes one wonder how attention dynamics on the issues of immigration and asylum at EU level were before the crisis in 2015. Because, this might provide an answer to the question how the CEAS was developed in the period before the crisis in 2015.

1.2 *Research question & Hypothesis*

The focus of this study will be on the European Council and the way it has given attention to the issues of immigration and asylum since 1975. The issue of asylum is selected within the overarching issue of immigration as the relevance to research this issue domain has grown as exemplified in the introduction relating this study to the Refugee Crisis of 2015. The research question of this study will be: *"How did the attention dynamics develop around the issues of immigration and asylum in the agenda of the European Council between 1975 and 2014?"* In this study, the approach taken will be structured around the Punctuated Equilibrium Theory, which was developed by Frank Baumgartner and Bryan Jones (1993, 2009). This theory was developed to explain the observation that political processes are not always stable and characterized by incrementalism but are occasionally subject to periods of crisis where major policy changes occur. Furthermore, attention is given a significant role in explaining agenda-setting processes in this theory as it is an pre-condition for policy change (True, Jones, & Baumgartner., In Sabatier, 2007, p. 156). As this study aims to describe a possible pattern in attention dynamics in the agenda of the European Council, this theory is providing us the instruments to do so. It allows us to analyse attention dynamics over time and provides tools to give meaning to these dynamics. Therefore, following the theory of Puntuated equilibrium, the hypothesis of this study is that: *"Attention dynamics in the European Council on the issues of*

immigration and asylum follow a pattern of periods of stability of attention alternated with sudden periodic peaks of attention”.

As this study applies the theory of Punctuated Equilibrium to the EU policy field of immigration and asylum, the study could contribute to a better understanding of the historic development of EU immigration and asylum policy as an agenda issue and could also be useful for explaining the agenda-setting dynamics within the European Council (Alexandrova et al., In Foret & Rittelmeyer, 2013, p. 56). Secondly, in the last five years immigration and asylum issues have seen a huge increase in media attention due to the refugee crisis that started in 2015. The academics studying this crisis, point to the fact that the signs for a crisis were there well before it happened making studying the period before 2015 interesting from a social point of view. Furthermore, using an agenda-setting approach contributes to the literature in the field of EU immigration and asylum policy because it has been mostly researched from a legal and sociological point of view leaving research to be done from the political science perspective. Lastly, the study contributes to the developing body of research on Punctuated Equilibrium Theory applied to the EU policy fields, as the theory has not yet been applied to the chosen policy field of this study by other authors. Thus, this study could increase the theoretical and practical significance of Punctuated Equilibrium Theory in EU agenda-setting research and its application to EU policy fields.

2 Literature Review

Originally the theory of Punctuated Equilibrium has been developed to study the policy and agenda-setting dynamics of United States politics (Baumgartner & Jones, 1993, p. 4). However, the theory has been proven useful in EU context and has been used by authors in various policy domains. The theory has been used in the study of Alexandrova (2015) focusing on the role of focusing events in EU agenda-setting (Alexandrova, 2015, p. 525). In addition, Alexandrova and Timmermans (2014) also applied the theory to the field of Energy showing episodic peaks in attention and policy change for the issues. Besides being applicable to previous mentioned policy fields, the theory has been shown applicable to the issue of organised crime at EU level by Elias and Timmermans (2014). Furthermore, Manuele Citi (2013) has successfully applied the theory to EU Budget policy dynamics and Princen (2010) shows in his study that the theory is applicable for EU fisheries policy. Additionally, Princen (2009) also applied the Punctuated Equilibrium Theory to the policy domains of Environment and Health in the EU. In these studies agenda dynamics have been similar to those predicted by the theory (Citi, 2013, p. 1170; Princen, 2010, p. 39).

Furthermore, the theory of Punctuated Equilibrium has been found applicable to the European Council. The theory was successfully applied by Alexandrova et al (2012), in their study about issue diversity and policy punctuations in the European Council. They found that the shifts in attention this institution makes, are consistent with the theory (Alexandrova et al., 2012, pp. 84-85). Concluding, the body of previous done research on the theory used in this study is abundant. It has been found applicable to various EU policy fields and to the European Council as will be done in this study.

3 Theoretical Framework

3.1 *Bounded Rationality*

The Punctuated Equilibrium Theory is rooted in the concept of '*bounded rationality*' which has been developed by Herbert Simon (1985). The key idea behind this concept is that human decision-makers are cognitively limited in their capacity of serial processing (that is processing one thing at the time instead of multiple at once) of information (Jones, 1994, p. 13; Baumgartner & Jones, 1993, p. 10). This human biological necessity to process cognitive information serially is called the '*bottleneck of attention*'. It implicates that humans attend only one issue at the time or are able to broaden this marginally by switching between issues, this is called '*serial shifting*' (Simon, 1985, p. 302; Jones & Baumgartner, 2005, p. 20). The implication for policy making is that the leaders of political systems are selective in giving their attention and therefore cannot attend to all problems at the same time (Baumgartner & Jones, 1993, p. 10; Jones & Baumgartner, 2005, p. 20). Furthermore, the '*bottleneck of attention*' is associated with emotion, making trade-off calculations more difficult when information coming to policy-makers is ambiguous and framed to stress certain aspects of a problem (Jones & Baumgartner, 2005, p. 21). Lastly, '*bounded rationality*' implicates that humans tend to adhere to learned rules and find it therefore difficult to learn new rules to process information that does not fit learned rules. This means that certain information in politics is better fit for processing than other information (Jones & Baumgartner, 2005, p. 22).

To conclude, '*bounded rationality*' leads to information processing that is disproportionate and fails to effectively and efficiently process all information (Princen, 2013, p. 854). This leads to a model of delay and over-reaction by policy-makers because of the earlier described elements of '*bounded rationality*'. These create a build up of pressure under the status quo in the political system before turning the attention to a new dimension of the issue, which results in major policy change (Jones & Baumgartner, 2005, p. 22; True et al., 2007, p. 157 & 177). In essence, under what dimension an issue is processed determines whether attention is given to an issue by the political system or not (Jones, 1994, p. 155).

3.2 *Serial and Parallel Processing*

Under the notion of '*bounded rationality*' humans are only able to give attention to one issue at the time; however, organizations are capable of handling more at once (True et al., 2007, p. 158). This capability originates from the fact that organisations are able to divide separate tasks

to specialized units who deal with the issue in a serial way (Jones & Baumgartner, 2005, p. 45). However, even though the European Council is an official institution of the EU, it does not have any administrative agencies at its disposal like other institutions within the EU. Thus, dividing and delegating tasks to process them in a parallel way as other EU institutions do, is impossible for the European Council (Alexandrova et al., In Foret & Rittelmeyer, 2013, p. 60). Continuing, the parallel processing of issues is done in the so called '*subsystems*' of the political system (Jones, 1994, p. 157; True et al., 2007, p. 158). These '*subsystems*' are described as: issue networks, iron triangles or policy subsystems. Administrative agencies, like the lower level ministries that operate under the oversight of macropolitical institutions, like Congress in the US or the European Parliament in the EU are examples of these '*subsystems*' (Jones, 1994, p. 158). When issues are dealt with in the '*subsystems*' they tend to be shielded from publicity that is common to issues discussed at the macropolitical institutions (True et al., 2007, p. 159). Within the '*subsystems*' only incremental changes are made to policy, due to bargaining among experts and an equilibrium is created because of the continuous incorporation of interests and satisfying them (Jones, 1994, p. 158; True et al., 2007, p. 158). This equilibrium is a key feature of subsystem politics because it points to policy monopolies that are achieved when there is a single wide accepted policy image (True et al., 2007, p. 162; Baumgartner & Jones, 1993, p. 59). This policy image is the dimension in which people discuss and process the issue. However, when this image changes, a different dimension becomes prominent and thus the policy monopoly collapses (True et al., 2007, p. 162; Baumgartner & Jones, 1993, p. 60). When this happens, an issue is transferred from the political subsystems to the macropolitical institutions where it is serially processed (True et al., 2007, pp. 159-161). Serial processing is done by institutions like the European Council as their key features are that they are able to establish new policy images and prioritize issues on their agenda. Later on, when a new policy image is established at the macropolitical institutions the issue returns to the subsystems and a new equilibrium is established (True et al., 2007, pp. 159-161).

3.3 *Macropolitical institutions and Punctuations*

A punctuation of the equilibrium is achieved when an issue receives attention from macropolitical institutions because of a '*serial shift*' in attention of these institutions (Baumgartner & Jones, 1993, p. 12). Such shift originates from the fact that these institutions process all issues serially. Thus, if an issue becomes more urgent, attention is being shifted from one issue to another as handling them at the same time is impossible. Furthermore, a

'focusing event' can also create urgency to redirect attention. A *'focusing event'* is described by Elias (2019) as a sudden, powerful and salient socio-political occurrence. These events can include natural disasters, manmade events, events with a positive connotation like policy occurrences that trigger mobilization on a topic (immigration and asylum in this study) and events that have a negative connotation when they for example harm people (Elias, 2019, p. 224). Furthermore, a linked concept is that of the *'bottleneck of attention'*. This entails that there is a limited amount of attention to be distributed, therefore issues will be prioritized in how much attention they will receive (Simon, 1985, p. 302). This applies directly to the European Council as it gathers just a few times each year which limits the available space on its agenda considerably.

Attention for an issue on the agenda must be seen in relation to other issues as they compete for the limited amount of space in the agenda. The concept behind this is called *'issue competition'*, pointing to the fact that as space is limited in the agenda, issues compete among each other for attention and space (Alexandrova et al, 2012, pp. 82-83). Moving on, these concepts contribute to the way Punctuated Equilibrium Theory explains the setting and resetting of the agenda of political systems (Jones & Baumgartner, 2005, pp. 41-42). These punctuations of the equilibrium of attention are episodic and are linked to the build up of pressure on the political system to react to external impulses (True et al., 2007, p. 159). When the equilibrium is punctuated and an issue reaches the agenda, it has the potential to bring about major change, however, as True, Jones and Baumgartner (2007) state it: "agenda access does not guarantee major change, however, because reform is often blunted in the decisionmaking stage. But this access is a precondition for major policy punctuations" (True et al., 2007, p. 159).

Under these assumptions, Baumgartner and Jones argue, with their Punctuated Equilibrium Theory, against the notion of incrementalism of Lindblom (1979) in the agenda-setting perspective. Rather than arguing that the policy making process is characterized by incremental steps they argue it is a process that is formed by alternating periods of steadiness and stability and periods of major change and abrupt shifts in policy making (Lindblom, 1979, p. 520; Baumgartner & Jones, 1993, p. 10; Princen, 2013, p. 855). The alternation of periods is caused by the disproportionate processing of information by political institutions as they are *'boundedly rational'*. This makes the view of political institutions on solutions and problems fixed to a certain extent and is only changed when the pressure to allocate attention exceeds the threshold and cannot be ignored by macropolitical institutions (Alexandrova et al., In Foret & Rittelmeier, 2013, p. 57). Thus the problem becomes urgent and rises to the top of the agenda of macropolitical institutions (Jones, 1994, pp. 74-75; Jones & Baumgartner, 2005, pp. 60-61).

3.4 *The European Council and its role as EU agenda-setter*

As stated before in this study, the European Council is a major agenda-setter in EU politics (Alexandrova et al., In Foret & Rittelmeyer, 2013, p. 53; Elias & Timmermans, 2014, p. 162; (Alexandrova et al., 2012, p. 71). When the Treaty of Lisbon entered into force in 2009, the European Council was transformed from an informal institution to a formal institution of the European Union (TEU: art. 13; Alexandrova, 2015, p. 509). The European Council consists of the highest political leaders of the EU member states plus the President of the Commission and operates among the top EU policy making institutions (TEU: art. 15). As a political body, the European Council meets on a regular basis four times each year, but in the case of urgent matters that require direct attention more meetings could be scheduled (Alexandrova et al., In Foret & Rittelmeyer, 2013, p. 59; TEU: art. 15). The meetings take place behind closed doors, therefore the conclusions of the council's presidency are the only official written sources about the dealings of the European Council (Alexandrova et al., In Foret & Rittelmeyer, 2013, p. 55). In these conclusions the European Council performs one of its main tasks as is written down in the Treaty on European Union (TEU) in artikel 15: 'The European Council shall provide the Union with the necessary impetus for its development and shall define the general political directions and priorities thereof'(TEU: art. 15). Furthermore, these conclusions represent the '*High Politics*' agenda of the EU, even though they are not legally binding, in practice they could imply political commitments for the European institutions to follow up on (Alexandrova et al., In Foret & Rittelmeyer, 2013, p. 56).

Although the European Council has become a formal institution of the EU, it has never been equipped with an administrative agency. This makes that the European Council can only attend issues one at the time thus processing them serially (Alexandrova et al., In Foret & Rittelmeyer, 2013, p. 60). Therefore, it needs to perform all its functions by itself, making the selection of which issues to attend to of great importance. The contrast with other EU institutions is therefore quite evident, institutions like the European Commission and the Council of Ministers are able to process information and attend to issues respectively by delegating them to Directory Generals (DG's) and ministers of member states could meet in various formations. Not being able to process information in such parallel way, the concept of a '*bottleneck of attention*' fits the setting in which the European council deals with issues on its agenda. As issues are dealt with at the European council and are present in the conclusions of a meeting, this gives a strong impetus for other EU institutions to attend to the issues (Alexandrova et al., In Foret & Rittelmeyer, 2013, p. 56; TEU: art. 4; Wessels, 2008, p. 16).

Concludingly, this study follows the argument that the European Council has been one of the most important agenda-setting institutions in the EU and it has been called the “supreme political authority” (Westlake & Galloway, 2004, p. 171) of the EU and “a locus of power second to none in the ... EU’s institutional system today” (Hayes- Renshaw & Wallace, 2006, p. 165). Additionally, this agenda is seen as a major guideline for other EU institutions and a signal for which issues need to be attended to (Wessels, 2008, p. 17). Therefore, this study will look at the role of the European Council as major agenda-setter to the extent that its conclusions form the official political agenda of the European Council (Alexandrova, 2014, p. 77). As these conclusions form the political agenda of the European Council, in this study, attention is defined as the occurrence of issues in these conclusions (Elias, 2019, p. 32). Thus, the definition of attention in the European Council enables us to study the attention dynamics around the issues of immigration and asylum using their conclusions as data and Punctuated Equilibrium as theoretical framework.

Moreover, as pointed out in this theoretical framework, the European Council fits the concepts used in Punctuated Equilibrium Theory. Thus, applying Punctuated Equilibrium Theory to a macropolitical institution as the European Council and its agenda dynamics will result in the hypothesis that: *Attention dynamics in the European Council on the issues of immigration and asylum follow a pattern of periods of stability of attention alternated with sudden periodic peaks of attention”*.

4 Research Design

4.1 Research overview

In this research, the attention for the issues of immigration and asylum in the European Council conclusions will be measured using both a quantitative and a qualitative content analysis. By establishing an overview of the attention dynamics of these issues in the European Council conclusions, this research aims to discover a pattern in the attention dynamics of these issues and explain these dynamics. The expected pattern in the hypothesis is described in the theory of Punctuated Equilibrium by Baumgartner and Jones (1993, 2009). They describe a pattern that is characterized by periods of stability and periods of major policy change. As attention is a pre-condition for policy change, we expect attention dynamics to follow the same pattern (True et al., 2007, p. 159).

4.2 Methodology

For this study, to establish an overview of the attention dynamics of immigration and asylum issues in the European Council conclusions, it is necessary to find a methodology that is suitable to meet this end. As research design a longitudinal design has been chosen. This research method is known for its ability to: “Explore changes or trends over time” (Halperin & Heath, 2017, p. 151). Furthermore, longitudinal designs are concerned with explaining the variation that occurs over time within a place over time (Halperin & Heath, 2017, p. 152.). Therefore, to distinguish a pattern in the attention dynamics, this design suits the goal of this study.

The chosen method of research within the longitudinal research design is a systematic content analysis. This method is an unobtrusive method of data collection. It has as main advantage over other methods of data collection such as semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions, that it reduces bias. Furthermore, a systematic content analysis has the advantage that it is not prone to the so called ‘*Heisenberg Effect*’. This is the effect that when people know they are under observation they change their behaviour (Halperin & Heath, 2017, p. 345). Additionally, this method of research has the advantage that it enables us to research subjects (EU heads of states) that are normally difficult to reach. Lastly, the research method also enables us to study a large quantity of data and documents (Halperin & Heath, 2017, p. 346). However, the chosen method also has some downsides in relation to the reliability of the research. These downsides are: documents can be vague or poorly written, data coding instructions can be ambiguous, in the process of defining categories and coding the (sections

of) text there can be a lack of objectivity and lastly, coders can make mistakes (Halperin & Heath, 2017, p. 355).

The longitudinal content analysis performed in this study will be both quantitative and qualitative. This mixed-methods approach is selected because in this way multiple sources of data can be used to give an accurate in-depth overview of the attention dynamics in the European Council agenda. Furthermore, the combination of both methods enables to provide a clear overview using quantitative data for a graphical illustration and using qualitative data to accurately observe specific elements of the agenda dynamics.

The chosen timeframe for the longitudinal quantitative and qualitative content analyses is from 1975 up until 2014. As this study aims to give an overview of the attention dynamics in the European Council it is logical to include all years of its existence since 1975 (Alexandrova, 2014, p. 98). The timeframe of the analysis stops at 2014 because the available dataset does not provide data after that year (Alexandrova et al, 2015, p. 2). The qualitative analysis will use the same time frame as this fits the goals of this research. Moreover, going beyond this time frame merely for the fact that qualitative data is available does not connect to the goals of this study.

4.3 *Data Selection & Operationalization*

In the analysis an overview will be given of when and how much attention was devoted to the issues of immigration and asylum in the European Council. For the quantitative part of the analysis, a graphical illustration will be made using the dataset from the European Union Policy Agendas Project by Alexandrova, Carammia, Princen and Timmermans (2015). In this dataset the core variable is CAPIC (Comparative Agendas Project Issue Code). This codes for the policy content of sentences or quasi-sentences of the Conclusions of the European Council from 1975 till 2014. The aim of this is to trace issue attention, therefore each sentence or quasi-sentence in the dataset is given a single topic code that stands for an issue topic in the codebook of the dataset (Alexandrova et al, 2015, p. 2). Because the attention for the issue can be easily quantified, the dataset seamlessly connects to the goals of this study. The goal is to measure when and how much attention has been given by the European Council to the issues of immigration and asylum. Furthermore, the dataset includes the data of the European Council conclusions over a long period of time which enables us to do research over a longer period of time. This is important for testing the Punctuated Equilibrium Theory as peaks in attention only become visible over longer periods of time. These peaks, if they are there, will become visible

in the graphical illustration as the cumulative amount of mentions of the selected subtopics will be added up for each year. In this way, sudden increases in attention will become visible as the graph will show a peak in those years. For the qualitative part of the analysis the conclusions of the European Council will be used as data. These will be retrieved from the website of the European Council. The conclusions will be used in the analysis if they contain (one or several of) the selected subtopics from the codebook of the dataset as outlined below and provide additional information for the analysis.

The topics this research focusses on are immigration and asylum. In the codebook, both topics are found under the category of immigration. The subtopics of this category are: General (900), Immigrant workers (929), Refugees and Asylum Issues (931), Acquisition of Nationality (932), Illegal Immigration and Repatriation (933), Entry of Immigrants (940), Integration of Immigrants (941), Border Control (950) and Other (999) (Alexandrova et al, 2015, p. 8). All of these subtopics will be included in this study as immigration and asylum are multifaceted issues thus dealing with them requires them to be broken down in subtopics. Therefore, excluding subtopics would not be justifiable in relation to the goal of this research to study the attention dynamics of both issues in the European Council.

In this study, attention for the issues of immigration and asylum in the European Council is operationalized as the mentioning of these issues in the conclusions of the European Council. This operationalization is logical and necessary as the conclusions are the only official documents the European Council produces and therefore reflects its agenda (Alexandrova et al., In Foret & Rittelmeyer, 2013, p. 55). Therefore, if issues are mentioned in the conclusions of the European Council they have been given attention. Furthermore, as this study will use relative numbers in the analysis of the attention dynamics of immigration and asylum issues it should be clear to what the numbers are relative. The presented numbers are relative to the total amount of mentions of all (sub)topics in the dataset per year. Thus, in this study the total agenda space of the European Council is operationalized as the total amount of mentions of all (sub)topics per year in the dataset.

Furthermore, the concept of '*serial shifting*' is operationalized in this study as a strong fluctuation in attention for issues within a single year. Meaning that, in one year, the number of mentions in the European Council conclusions is rises or falls noticeably between each gathering. Additionally, the concept of a '*focusing event*' is operationalized as socio-political occurrences that are salient, powerful and sudden (Elias, 2019, p. 224). These events can include natural disasters, manmade events, events with a positive connotations like policy occurrences that trigger mobilization on a topic (immigration and asylum in this study) and

events that have a negative connotation when they for example harm people. It also includes events that have an impact on the policy of immigration and asylum. These events can take place both within the EU and outside the EU (Elias, 2019, p. 224).

4.4 Absolute vs Relative issue attention

In the analysis the number of mentions in the dataset will be counted and added up for each year of the researched period. However, the downside to this method is that it does not take into account that the total space of the agenda could vary per year or that the overall carrying capacity of the agenda of the European Council might grow over the researched period. The implication of these aspects for our study is the following. When the overall carrying capacity of the agenda of the European Council increases or varies between years in the researched period, absolute numbers are not representative for measuring issue attention over multiple years. Therefore, in order to accurately measure issue attention over multiple years we should use relative numbers. This relative number will be calculated by dividing the total amount of mentions of all topics in the dataset within a year by the total amount of mentions on the (sub)topics of immigration and asylum in the same year. Furthermore, choosing to present the data in relative numbers will be in line with the theoretical notion that issues compete for attention in the political agenda (Jones & Baumgartner, 2005, pp. 41-42). Relative numbers show the space an issue has been given in relation to all other issues on the agenda. Thus, a relative depiction of issue attention is theoretically and logically the most accurate way of measuring issue attention in the European Council as it takes in to account the variation in space on the European Council agenda.

5 Results & Analysis

5.1 Analysis overview & expectations

The analysis will consist out of three parts. Firstly, using the data from the dataset, an analysis will be done on the development of the total amount of agenda space in the European Council. Secondly, a graphical illustration will be made of the attention dynamics of the issues of immigration and asylum in the European Council conclusions to graphically illustrate the pattern in attention dynamics. Thirdly, the attention dynamics will be analyzed according to this graphical illustration using the Conclusions of the European Council retrieved from the website. Building on the quantitative and qualitative analyses, the theoretical concepts of Punctuated Equilibrium Theory will be applied to the observed attention dynamics in order to give meaning to them.

Theoretical expectations of this analysis are that the attention dynamics will follow the pattern described by the Punctuated Equilibrium Theory. The expected pattern is therefore that periods of stability in attention will be alternated with periodic peaks in attention for the selected sub issues (Baumgartner & Jones, 1993, p. 10). This is linked to the ‘*bottleneck of attention*’ caused by the fact that the European Council as macropolitical institution is only able to process issues serially (Alexandrova et al., In Foret & Rittelmeyer, 2013, pp. 56 & 60).

5.2 Agenda space in the European Council

The total agenda space of the European Council per year over the researched period is visualized in figure one (page 17). Here, the total number of mentions of all topics in the dataset are added up per year. In this figure we see a great variation in the total number of mentions per year thus a variation in agenda space. Furthermore, we see an overall increase in mentions per year since the beginning of the researched period. Therefore, the overall carrying capacity of the agenda of the European Council has grown over the researched period. The implication of this observation for this study is the following. As the overall carrying capacity of the agenda of the European Council has increased and varies between years in the researched period. Thus, a relative depiction of issue attention as has been visualized by the blue graph line in figure two (page 19) is more accurate than the absolute depiction of issue attention as has been visualized by the orange bars in figure two (page 19).

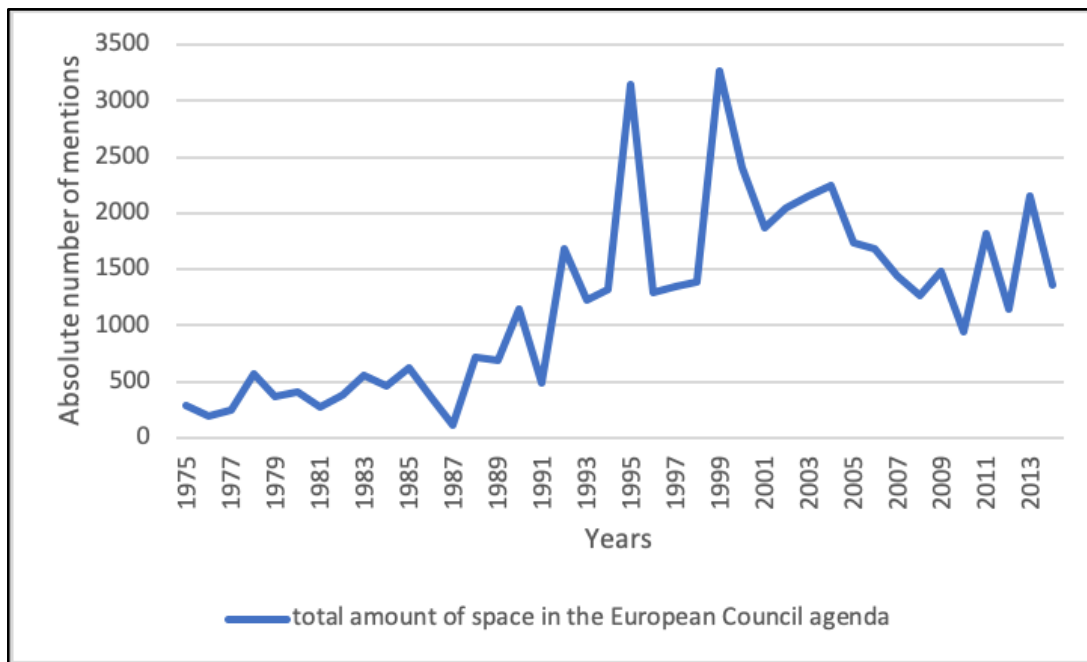


Figure 1. Total agenda space of the European Council agenda¹

5.3 Attention dynamics immigration and asylum issues

In the 1970's, the issues of immigration and asylum arrived for the first time on the agenda of the European Council. The consideration was low and were spoken of in 1975 only in regard to border control and the harmonization of conditions of entry and abolition of these conditions between member states of the European Community. The second time the issue of immigration or one of its sub issues was mentioned in the conclusions of the European Council was in 1979 in regard to the refugee crisis in Indochina. The relative attention it got on the agenda was only marginally and constituted just one percent of the whole agenda space (see figure 2). In the following years of 1980 and 1981 the topic of immigration was mentioned in regard to refugee issues outside the EU. It was until 1984 and 1985 the topic immigration was spoken of again in regard to the sub issues of border patrol of frontiers post and the immigration of third country nationals into European member states (European Council, 1984, p. 8; European Council, 1985, p. 10).

In 1986 the European Council spoke for the first time in its conclusions about the integration and immigration of migrants to Europe. At the same time, the European Council also began to discuss the issue of illegal immigration (European Council, 1986, p. 16). These sub issues were bespoken in regard to the statement that: “The Heads of State and Government

¹ The data used in this figure is acquired from the European Union Policy Agendas Project Dataset by Alexandrova, Carammia, Princen and Timmermans (2015).

underlined their continued willingness to give asylum according to their national legislation and treaty commitments” (European Council, 1986, p. 15). In this year (1986) the attention for immigration and asylum issues peaked for the first time since the official meetings of the European Council began, constituting almost five percent of its agenda (see figure 2).

At the end of the 1980’s attention was low for immigration issues and constituted only a marginal portion of the agenda as it was mentioned as a subtopic of the commitments of the 1986 Single European Act (European Council, 1989, p. 5). With the turn of the decade and the signing of the convention on asylum, the attention for immigration rose rapidly on the European Council agenda constituting more than six percent of its total volume (see figure 2) (European Council, 1991, p. 10). Additionally, in 1992 the European Council presented a declaration on principles governing external aspects of immigration policy. This formed the second punctuation of attention for the issues of immigration and asylum in the European Council (European Council, 1992, pp. 41-45). From this moment in time, the late 1980’s and the beginning of the 1990’s, the agenda of immigration and asylum issues got actual shape.

Attention for the issues declined after the first years of the 1990’s, fluctuating steadily around the two percent of the total agenda space of the European Council. In this period of attention stability, all sub issues were discussed occasionally except for the issues of Immigrant workers, acquisition of nationality and integration of immigrants. Furthermore, refugees and asylum issues were mentioned more often in the conclusions of the European Council.

With the turn of the century a third punctuation in attention for immigration and asylum issues in the European Council conclusions can be observed (see figure 2). This punctuation was conceived by the European Council’s call for a “true common asylum and immigration policy” (European Council, 2001, p. 11). Furthermore, in the European Council conclusions of December 2002 the issues of asylum and immigration were listed third giving more prominence to the issues (European Council, 2002, p. 7). In the following years the issues are given major attention in the conclusions of the European Council making up almost nine percent of the total agenda space (see figure 2). Even though on yearly basis attention is constantly high, between European Council meetings the attention for the issues fluctuates remarkably. This is illustrated by the fact that in the conclusions between June 2003 and December 2007, the issues are given major attention under the agenda point of ‘*Freedom, Security and Justice*’ but are absent in several conclusions within the same period.

After a period of decline in attention from 2007 till 2010 for the issues of immigration and asylum, the salience of the issues increased in 2011 due to the Libyan civil war (European Council, 2011, p. 4). Especially the sub issue of border control was given most attention in this

punctuation followed by the general subtopic for immigration leaving the other subtopics nearly undiscussed. The punctuation of attention in 2011 was short-lived in comparison with major punctuation from 2003 till 2007 as attention declined the following year.

In the last years the graph line in figure 2 shows a new increase in attention for immigration and asylum issues on the agenda of the European Council. The subtopics mentioned most are linked to the immigration flows at Europe's southern borders, these are: illegal immigration, border control and asylum.

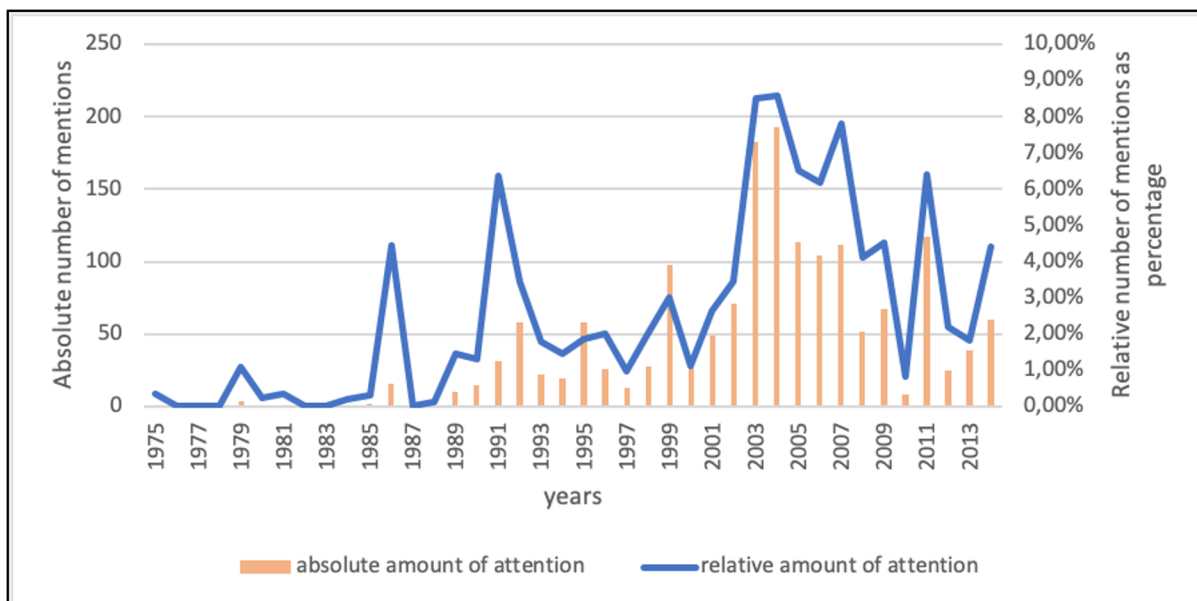


Figure 2. Attention to immigration and asylum on the European Council agenda²

5.4 Attention punctuations in theoretical context

Over the studied period of 1975 till 2014 four major punctuations of attention can be detected for the issues of immigration and asylum on the agenda of the European Council. The pattern of attention detected in the results is non-incremental which is opposed to the notion of incrementalism by Lindblom (1979). This is in line with the hypothesis of this study stating that: “*Attention dynamics in the European Council on the issues of immigration and asylum follow a pattern of periods of stability of attention alternated with sudden periodic peaks of attention*”. Therefore, the hypothesis is not rejected according to the results of the data analysis. To support the findings of this study it is important to put them in theoretical context, this will be done in the following paragraph.

² The data used in this figure is acquired from the European Union Policy Agendas Project Dataset by Alexandrova, Carammia, Princen and Timmermans (2015).

In the first 10 years of meetings studied, no punctuations were found and attention for the issues of immigration and asylum was low or absent. The first punctuation of attention in 1986 shows the importance of the relative amount of attention issues received on the European Council agenda. As is depicted in figure two, in absolute numbers the issues were mentioned 16 times in the conclusions. However, the total amount of agenda space was quite low in those days resulting in a stronger competition for attention among the issues. This is in line with the theoretical notion of competition among issues for attention on the agenda by Jones and Baumgartner (2005). After this first punctuation relative attention dropped to zero and continued to be rather low for the following years.

The second major punctuation was in 1991 and was in absolute number of mentions as well as in relative numbers of mentions larger than the first. From the results of this study the right theoretical explanation for this punctuation is found using the concept of a focusing event. The focusing event in this case was the signing of a convention on asylum by the member states (European Council, 1992, pp. 41-45). This highlighted the importance immigration and asylum issues and therefore attracted the attention of the Heads of States in the European Council.

The third major punctuation of attention for the issues began in 2003 and could have arguably lasted till 2007. This punctuation is different from the others observed in this study as it lasts for multiple years and is higher in absolute number and relative numbers than the other punctuations. The fact that the issues of immigration and asylum attracted major attention in a macropolitical institution seems in contradiction with the Punctuated Equilibrium Theory. However, the concept of '*serial shifting*' could serve as an explanation for the continuous attention for the issues between 2003 and 2007. The concept of '*serial shifting*' explains the shifting of attention between issues by macropolitical institutions like the European Council (Simon, 1985, p. 302; Baumgartner & Jones, 1993, p. 12; Jones & Baumgartner, 2005, p. 20). Combining the graph line with the conclusions of the European Council uncovers that from 2003 till 2007 the European Council shifted its attention one or two times per year to the issues of immigration and asylum. Thus, the attention was shifted between meetings in the same year from one main issue to the other.

The last punctuation of attention was in 2011 and followed the occurrence of a focusing event in the same year. The Libyan civil war attracted major attention and was even deemed important enough to schedule extra meetings of the European Council which increased the amount of space for immigration and asylum issues on its agenda as can be seen in figure two (Alexandrova et al., In Foret & Rittelmeyer, 2013, p. 59; TEU: art. 15; European Council, 2011,

p. 4). Due to this focusing event more attention was given to the issues of immigration and asylum and made them rise on the agenda of the European Council.

6 Conclusions

This study aimed to research how the attention dynamics developed around the issues of immigration and asylum in the agenda of the European Council between 1975 and 2014. The hypothesis of this study was that: “*Attention dynamics in the European Council on the issues of immigration and asylum follow a pattern of periods of stability of attention alternated with sudden periodic peaks of attention*”. Based on the results of the analysis in this study, it should be concluded that this hypothesis must not be rejected.

Firstly, the most important finding of this study in answering the research question was that the issues of immigration and asylum followed the by Punctuated Equilibrium Theory described pattern of attention, as was predicted in the hypothesis. Crucial was that in the performed analysis four major punctuations of attention were found in the period between 1975 and 2014 that were alternated with periods of relative stability in attention. This finding is crucial as it confirms the expected pattern of the Punctuated Equilibrium Theory on which the hypothesis of this study is based.

Furthermore, this study used a mixed-methods approach to analyze agenda dynamics in the European Council. This approach improved the scope and depth of the study as it provided both the tools to create an overview of the attention dynamics over a longer period of time, as it enabled an in-depth analysis of underlying agenda-setting processes. Additionally, the use of a relative measurement method of attention in the European Council agenda made the findings of this study more theoretically accurate. The use of this method acknowledges the notion of ‘*issue competition*’, as the amount of attention for an issue must be seen in relation to the available attention for all issues. However, on a more critical note, an important weakness of this study must be addressed. The peaks that were observed in the analysis of this study were not statistically tested as is done in other research on Punctuated Equilibrium Theory by Citi (2013) and Elias & Timmermans (2014). In their research the peakedness of the distribution of attention changes was tested and found to be leptokurtic, which is conform the Punctuated Equilibrium Theory (Elias & Timmermans, 2014, p. 170). Such statistical testing could have increased the significance of the findings of this study but was not done due to limited time and resources.

To conclude, further research is recommended on various sub issues of immigration, as our analysis falls short in giving a precise account of what sub issues rose significantly in respect to other sub issues. Additionally, further research is necessary in the field issue competition to advance knowledge on what issues compete with each other for attention and

which compete less for attention. In this way one could possibly acquire more knowledge about European immigration and asylum agenda-dynamics to shed light on the dealings of the European Council prior to the refugee crisis in 2015.

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