COURTLY INTRIGUES IN THE EUROPEAN UNION: The consequences of National Populism in the development of coalition building in the Council of the European Union

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The consequences of National Populism in the development of coalition building in the Council of the European Union

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Abstract

When talking about decision-making in the European Union the main institution that appears as the leading one is the Council of the European Union. The table where the different Ministers gather together. In the Council, for policies to go forward coalitions need to be formed. Since the EU Expansion of 2004, when many new smaller states were added, these coalitions have normally been headed by two countries: France and Germany. The latter one was able to bring to its side most of the new post-Communist countries and help her in supporting policies that go from climate change to economics. However, during the 2010s a new series of populist governments would appear on the scene and certain issues that should have had a consensus were not able to be it forward for some new populist government. The question now lies in whether this change in attitude was something that came from disagreements on policy or as a consequence of populist rhetoric in domestic policy. To see what the impact of populism in Central and Eastern Europe has been on the dynamics of coalition building in the European Council, this paper will use a Most Similar Research Design to compare two different cases of Central and Eastern European countries, Poland and Lithuania, one that was ruled by a populist government and another that wasn't. Then two different pieces of legislation will be brought forward and see how Poland and Lithuania had to deal with both of them as well as how they engage with Western European countries. The main hypothesis is that populism will have a negative effect due to causing polarisation and diplomatic tensions.

INTRODUCTION

The Council of the European Union also known as the Council of Ministers or simply the Council, is one the most powerful institutions when it comes to decision-making in the European Union (Puetter, 2012). This institution acts as the second chamber in the legislative process of European laws, after Parliament. In there the different Ministers sit together and approve or reject those laws and proposed pieces of legislation that come from the Parliament. Similarly to the European Parliament, the decision-making is also very much influenced by coalitions (Elgström et al, 2001).

Typically, these coalitions tend to be done through a consensus-based approach, attempting to get as many countries as possible. However, after 2004 the number of countries within the EU almost doubled and the politics of coalition building became a much more complicated endeavour (Hosli, 2011). Later, throughout the 2010s new populist governments have started to take over control of the different governments. They would embrace a new anti-EU rhetoric, with the aspiration of maintaining the sovereignty of their states against the EU institutions and the power of the bigger and wealthier EU, this wave of populism was particularly strong in some Central and Eastern European countries where they would acquire governmental power (Styczynska and Dajc, 2023).

In these circumstances, it is crucial to inquire about the specific impact of populism in these newer EU countries on the process of coalition building in the Council. To resolve this the paper will answer the following question:

"How does the presence of national populist governments in Central & Eastern Europe affect coalition building dynamics in the Council of the European Union?".

There are two sides to the coalition, first how it affects their ability to work within the consensus majority as well as for the Western countries to include them in it and second how it affects their ability to create their opposing coalitions with other member states.

The structure of the paper will be the following. Firstly a literature review will be presented. In it, different approaches to the topic of populism and coalition building in the Council will be addressed. After that a theory will be presented to test the research question, in this theory I would argue that populism leads to polarisation, which in turn leads in the case of

Central and Eastern Europe to Nationalism which leads to failing coalition talks. After that the research design will be presented, in which the methodology and case selection of the data operationalisation will be presented, this will be done through a Most Similar System design, in which two different countries in CEE, and finally the results will be presented.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Council of the European Union is perhaps the most important institution when it comes to the governance and the decision-making of the European Union or as Lewis describes it "the heart of the European Union's decision-making" (2022). It is the institution where Ministers gather together to vote in favour or against legislation that is brought forward by the European Parliament. In a way, it acts as a second chamber of the European legislative process.

The Council of the European Union was created in 1967 as part of the Merger Treaty that merged the Councils of Ministers of the previously existing Communities, these being the European Economic Community (EEC) the European Atomic Energy Community (Euratom) and the Council for the Coal and Steel Community. This treaty merged the different Parliaments and Commissions. (Troitiño & Čekerevac, 2014) For most of its existence, the Council has been losing its power to other institutions. The Treaty of Lisbon granted a lot more new legislative powers to the European Parliament, taking them away from the Council. Then the European Council was officially separated from the Council of the EU in that same Treaty so any aspect of decision-making beyond legislation was partially lost. However, it is undeniable the importance that this Institution has in the legislative process since it is the Council that brings forward the views of the national governments in the EU legislation (Puetter, 2021).

For most of its history, the Council was driven by consensus and the leadership of France and Germany. During this period, the French President and the German Chancellor were the most important figures within the council. (Webber, 1999). This situation was disrupted with the inclusion of new members. With each expansion reaching an overall consensus became very complicated. The eastern expansion of 2004 was the most decisive factor in the transformation of the Council from a consensus-based institution to one based on alliances and coalitions. It also meant that France and Germany would be less prone to collaborate and instead try to form coalitions (Schramm, 2023).

Häge (2013) on the other hand still strongly disagrees with this perception. He argued that although coalitions exist in the end when it comes to the moment of voting it is mostly desired to obtain as much consensus as possible. The ideas of coalitions are according to them just an instrument by Germany and France to put pressure on each other but not necessarily to win them in a vote. Still, the role of French and German foreign services was crucial in almost every vote. He argues that for most countries there are advantages to joining a consensus-based alliance formed by France and Germany. Since a policy supported by these countries will have a higher chance of passing, countries have incentives to try to influence regulations instead of presenting alternative ones. There is also the fact that it is difficult to reach majorities without France and Germany.

Authors usually highlight the role of German and French diplomacy in the Council when discussing coalition building. According to Weber (1999), consensus is not always reached, leading Germany and France to forge coalitions with smaller EU countries to back their ideas. In this regard, Elgström (2001) brought up a point of common history and culture, which affects coalition formation pointing to the division between North and South in the Council of Ministers. It took a stand that northern European nations are more similar thus; they can cooperate better as a result can form alliances that need cooperation. This opinion is supported by Kaeding and Selck (2005).

Elgström's theories were later referred to in works such as Tallberg and Johansson (2008), who developed realist theory which argued that coalition formation is driven primarily by power dynamics and not cultural proximity. They suggested that the relevant states take the lead in coalitions. This, however, was partially divergent from what Blavoukos and Pagoulatos (2011) found out during the 2010 budget negotiations that coalition dynamics were shaped by national and political interests leading to volatility and instability. The reason why Elgströms as well as Tallberg & Johansson's ideas matter for this paper is because culture determines the formation of coalitions at the same time power decides it. However, when members become too stubborn while negotiating, they may estrange others as happened with the UK which isolated itself while pushing for reforms (Bulmer & Quaglia, 2018). It can be used as a case study on failed coalition-building efforts. Post-Euro crisis researchers found that most initiatives now lack consensus, with coalitions forming based on opposing political visions (Janning et al., 2017).

The enlargement of the previous decades had been challenging but the one of 2004 was the biggest and proved the most challenging to the balances in the Council. Already before the expansion of 2004, Fideli and Forte (2001) expressed the idea that the inclusion of many new members into the European Union would dramatically decrease the individual capacity of the states to act. Post-enlargement results showed that newer members do not tend to be very prone to block initiatives as much as older members. However, this situation is not necessarily permanent and as time went by it would become more common (Hosli, Mattila & Uriot, 2011).

The newer members also face another problem. Since the qualified majority in the Council gives more weight to countries with bigger populations, CEE countries run the risk of being overwhelmed by Western votes in the Council. Tallberg (2007) researched the dynamics of the European Council when it comes to the size of the member states. Even though his research is concentrated in another institution the dynamics that he describes between smaller and bigger countries can also be applied to the Council of the EU and to the situation that smaller countries face when they get outvoted by countries with bigger populations in a situation of qualified majority. According to Tallberg (2007), the increase in several EU member states has led to summits having less importance, due to the fact that too many members make decision-making there difficult and increased the importance of smaller meetings, sometimes just between two countries. According to Tallberg in these meetings, smaller countries play on a disadvantage and therefore tend to be bent over and their votes tend to be co-opted by bigger countries that exercise a bigger influence on them. This is precisely what Fideli and Forte predicted already in 2001 before the expansion. In this context, Germany had tried to strengthen its relations with the newly incorporated members and present itself as the "defender of small European states" as a way of gaining influence in the newly expanded Council (Jennings 2005).

Another trend that is also noticed by the literature is the growing presence of populist governments in the Council of the EU. Firstly, we need to delve into the definition of the idea of populism. This is a very wide and multifaceted idea that brings together a different series of ideas and a variety of definitions. Fabrizzi (2023) makes a thorough analysis of populism. For him, there needs to be a distinction between populism as a political concept on the one hand and then political actors that behave *populistically*. As a theoretical concept, populism is composed of two main ideas, firstly a division of society between a majority "the people" against a ruling minority

"the elite", and secondly a rejection of liberalism and its principles. Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2017) defined populism as a 'thin-centred ideology', which bases its meaning on a conflicting opposition between the 'real' people and the 'corrupted elites', to justify democratic institutions merely as the megaphone of the general will in the current incarnation of the people.

Fabrizzi (2023) also develops the idea of Populism as something that denies pluralism in a society. This is especially important for right-wing populists who deny the rights of minority groups, whether these are political, ethnic or social. Right-wing populism particularly tends to frame its populist fight as a clash between a conservative population, for which issues like religion and patriotism are paramount, against a secular and globalist elite that disregards these values. (Fabrizzi, 2023) This definition of populism will be of great importance in the analysis since it establishes a correlation in how populism leads to nationalism. This does not mean that populism rejects the idea of political representation but as Jan Werner Müller (2016) explains this representation has its limitations. "the right representatives represent the right people to make the right judgement and consequently do the right thing", meaning that politics should be done in a way that a political majority is not not limited by laws, rules or mechanism.

Cadier and Lequesne (2022) write about populism's influence on foreign policy within the European Union. They conclude that the main consequence of populism in diplomacy is an incoherent foreign policy. It also explains how countries that have populist governments struggle to form coalitions among themselves within the Council, precisely because they struggle to form a coherent foreign policy.

A year before that, Cadier (2021) explained how populism influences foreign policy, in the particular case of Poland. He concludes that populism is a phenomenon that almost exclusively affects domestic politics. What happens is that populist actions in domestic policy tend to indirectly affect or spill over the foreign policy of a country. On the other hand, Kreko and Enyedi (2018) disagree on that regard, bringing forward the Hungarian example. Viktor Orban's brand of populism does not only impact foreign policy but is also caused by foreign policy, in that sense because of disagreements with Brussels and therefore it takes centre stage of Hungarian populism. Hoffer (2023), also says that Populist politicians use the diplomatic tensions with Brussels and Germany as part of their populist rhetoric.

Finally, something that Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2017) specify is that populism, especially when successful can become a core element of the zeitgeist of a country and a core component of the politics of a nation. That is even political parties that are not populist can adopt some of the rhetoric or even some of its policies fearing losing their role in society.

There are two main gaps that this paper is trying to respond to, the first is how populism affects the dynamics of coalition building in the European Parliament and the second, is how this situation applies to the post-Communist countries in the European Union.

THEORY

As the literature has shown, different national interests influence coalition-building in complex negotiations within the Council of the European Union. Reaching an agreement has become more and more difficult since the eastern enlargement in 2004, while landmark navigation of political dynamics became particularly urgent because of the increased populism in Central and Eastern Europe.

Cadier and Lequesne (2022) argued that the influence of populism in the diplomacy of the European Union would be limited since according to them these governments tended to fall into incoherences and tended to focus more on domestic politics. I argue that even though this is partially true overall populism and foreign policy are deeply connected and as can be seen in many countries in Central & Eastern Europe like Poland but also Czechia it can be seen as a cause of the populist rise and where leaders like Kaczynski or Babis put their focus, as seen by Styczynska and Dajc (2023).

Populism, as seen before, relies on the existence of an elite to antagonise and rally the people. Populism and nationalism are not inherently linked, yet they operate through similar mechanisms. Both ideologies focus on delineating the boundaries of inclusion and exclusion within a group. When populist leaders cannot use the idea of a national elite anymore then the threat becomes foreign and this is where nationalism comes into play. This means that populism can be a starting point towards nationalism, including elements of sovereignty, and cultural preservation (Eatwell & Goodwin, 2021). If populism targets national elites, national populism targets international organisations and other countries as well. The European Union is used by national populists in government as a constant elitist threat (Taggart, 1997).

This is particularly true in Central and Eastern Europe where there is a long-standing history of foreign rule. This means that anti-elitism and conservative nationalism are very much connected (Stanley, 2017). Not only that but the recent experiences under communism have made some of these countries very sceptical to non-nationalist populist movements. There is also a sense of resentment and feeling of neglect at the core of this Euroscepticism. Unlike Western national populists who tend to focus their attacks on supranational institutions, those from the CEE tend to also emphasise the fear of domination by Western European states like Germany. (Kończal, 2022). This also means that if Germany takes a leading role in the negotiations national populists will use it to attack the reform (Hoffer, 2023).

The process from Populism to difficulties in coalition building is as follows. Firstly, This populist rhetoric leads to polarisation in society. Populist rhetoric is a broad term that encompasses different communication techniques. Overall the main aspects of it include, anti-elitism, appeal to emotions, simplification of complex issues, a Manichean worldview and the framing of issues through a conflict between the people and elite (Mudde, 2004). Authors like Hagemann, Hobolt and Wratil (2017) go through the impact that public opinion has on the actions of individual states within the Council. According to them, a member state would oppose consensus proposals if the public opinion of their own countries was active on the topic of the proposal. This means that the public opinion of a country presents itself as an important factor when determining whether a populist government will be capable of compromising in the Council. This polarisation inherently leads to an antagonisation of European leaders and institutions (Ongaro et al., 2022). Polarisation also means that negotiations become more difficult for political actors (Copelovitch & Pevehouse, 2019). The difference between a polarising issue with a majoritarian issue is that with the first one, there is no room for compromise as there is a higher emotional intensity. On the other hand with majoritarian opinion, there are more possibilities for concessions even with a certain political cost (Lijphart, 1999). This means that populism becomes a self-limiting element when engaging in diplomatic negotiations since many issues they could discuss have been polarised.

This leads to two consequences. Because of the antagonism that the populist country has shown the EU is going to be seen as an unreliable and untrustworthy partner by main Western European countries. On the other hand, nationalism has the consequence of making a country's

position too intransigent and self-centred and therefore incapable of forming blocking coalitions against reforms supported by the main EU countries (Ongaro et al., 2022).

I hypothesise that populism in Central & Eastern Europe has been a disruptive element in the ability to form coalitions within the Council of Ministers leading CEE countries to move out of consensus coalitions. A populist government in CEE will employ a strong rhetoric which will have two main objectives. The first will be to demonise Western European countries and the second to present the issue that is being discussed as non-negotiable and vital for the interest of the nation (Styczynska and Dajc, 2023). This leads to failed negotiations between the country in question and Western countries and European Institutions. As a result, the populist country will try to form an alternative coalition with the objective of either blocking or forcing further concessions. However, negotiations for these alternative coalitions would also prove unsuccessful since the populist country cannot put itself in the situation of making concessions. As a result of this, the populist country would vote against the motion in the Council.

I also hypothesise that in the case a populist government is replaced by a non-populist one, the new government would try to forge new diplomatic ties with both states and EU Institutions. One of the first signals would be a change in rhetoric which in turn would lead to a decreasing polarisation. This would result in a much more constructive negotiation and finally participation in the consensus coalition of the former populist country. One of the reasons for this is that the former populist country would have been able to gather a coalition not necessarily to block a proposal but rather to put pressure on France and Germany for further reforms.

In summary, it is very striking that countries from Central and Eastern Europe condition coalition-building behaviour in the Council of Ministers with populism, further shaping their paces of diplomatic engagement and thus general activeness in EU decision-making.

RESEARCH DESIGN

Methods

To conduct the research, the paper will perform a comparative analysis following a Most Similar System Design. In this method, two cases will be brought forward. Both cases will share similar characteristics, however bringing different results. The objective of this comparison will be to see whether the presence of populist governments in Central & Eastern Europe affects the

coalition dynamics in the Council, leading to them sometimes being isolated from the bigger European countries.

As explained by Anckar (2008) the Most similar System Design or MSSD is a system in which two cases are brought forward, Poland and Lithuania. These two cases share most characteristics except for the independent variable.

The main objective of this method is to minimise external variables and isolate the role of the independent variable. The MSSD aims to carefully match a small number of cases across a wide range of potential explanatory variables to exclude a wide range of variables from further analysis. As Anckar (2008) explains, the MSSD follows a strict variable-oriented approach, testing the effect of an independent variable on the dependent variable while keeping non-relevant variants constant.

In this case, for instance, the paper will contemplate how a populist Polish government and a non-populist one in comparison with the non-populist government of Lithuania managed the negotiations of the Migration Pact. The main independent variable which, as Anckar (2008) explained, will act as the main differentiator between the two cases will be the presence of populists in the government.

Case Selection

To see whether the increase of populist governments in Central and Eastern Europe has led to a weaker consensus in the Council this paper will compare two cases, separated in time, Poland and Lithuania.

These two old European nations have very similar societies and political situations. These similarities can be summarised in three points. Firstly, religion and tradition are very significant. Both Polish and Lithuanian populations are also majority Catholic, both societies tend to be patriotic, with a strong respect for the armed forces and a general acceptance of traditional values as well as a general negative view of immigration (Andriejauskaitė, 2024; CBOS, 2017). Secondly, there is the fact that both share a very similar socioeconomic situation, being very dependent on funds from the EU. Thirdly, there is the political factor. Both Poland and Lithuanian politics tend to feature for the most part parties on the right of centre, with small and weak left-wing parties (Grzymala-Busse, 2018; Vilpišauskas, 2018). This would imply that their

way of doing politics bears resemblance. Finally, and especially both countries find themselves on the border of the European Union with Belarus. This is especially significant because since 2021 both countries have experienced an increase of border crossing by asylum seekers from Middle Eastern countries. This makes both countries also rather unique in the region considering that they had to undergo their migrant crisis (Mikołajczyk & Jagielski). There is still a major difference between the two countries, which is their size. Poland with 35 million inhabitants can achieve much more influence in the Council than Lithuania with less than 3 million, also translating into different economic weights. Nevertheless, both countries hold strong geopolitical importance for the EU so therefore their contributions will be of great importance for the EU's decision making.

The idea will be to choose two different countries located in Central & Eastern Europe. The first is Poland which between 2015 and 2023 was ruled by the political party Law and Justice (PiS), a right-wing populist party, whose ideology has been characterised by nationalism and religious conservatism, the leader of the party is Jaroslaw Kaczcynky while Mateusz Morawiecki serves as Prime Minister. However, in December 2023 Poland changed government and the Civil Coalition returned to power, with liberal and centrist ideology (Grzymala-Busse, 2018). The second country is Lithuania, which saw its share of populism as well, like most European countries during the same period, but unlike Poland they never became dominant. Parties like the Farmers and Greens Union (LVZS) were never able to score more than 25% together and even in government from 2016 to 2020, they had to rule together and severely compromise their positions with the mainstream political parties such as the centre-right Homeland Union, the Social Democrats and the Liberals. Not only that but the LVZS cannot be considered a national populist party, since despite the usage of populist rhetoric this tends to be focused on farmers and agricultural populations, not the general Lithuanians (Ulinskaitė, 2020). From 2020 to 2024 Lithuania has been led by Ingrida Šimonytė in a coalition of three parties. The Homeland Union, a conservative, Christian democratic party, the Liberal Movement, a free-market liberal party and the progressive Freedom Party (Ulinskaite, 2020). The fact that Poland switched from a populist government to a non-populist one will serve to compare attitudes between them as well as with Lithuania to determine whether it was populism the determining factor or not.

The piece of legislation that this paper will use will be the Migration Pact, more specifically about the reforms and regulations that the Council approved from the beginning of the negotiations in 2020 to the final vote in 2024. Among the many states, Germany was particularly interested in a system in which refugees would be distributed among EU states.

I chose this topic for the following reasons. Firstly, migration is a contentious topic and therefore there will be different opinions and directions present. That is, issues like defence or foreign policy are of major consensus in both Poland and Lithuania, especially in what concerns Russia (Ulinskaite, 2020; Kończal, 2022). Second, this is an issue that causes polarisation in society, meaning that it tends to cause strong emotional reactions among its followers and will be used by populist politicians in their speeches and agendas.

Operationalisation

There are going to be two variables in this research. The independent variable will be the presence of populists in the government in Eastern European countries. Through this variable, the paper will see and analyse how it has impacted the capacity of coalition building with the countries in Central & Eastern Europe in the Council of Ministers.

Firstly, it is important to establish how qualitative studies measure populism. For that, I will use firstly the database on populism provided by the PopuList project, which provides a yearly Index on the presence of populist parties in Europe as well as the ideological tendency (left-right) of those parties (Rooduijn et al., 2023). I will also look into the speeches and rhetoric that some of these leaders did. Specifically, we are looking for messages that emphasise the difference between Central and Eastern European nations with Western nations, or that deal with the issue in question in a populist manner.

I am also looking for cases in which countries of Central and Eastern Europe have blocked or have refused to collaborate in initiatives in the Council that have been initiated by Western countries. To see this, we will focus on voting similarities. Apart from the results of the elections, the paper will go through all the diplomatic processes of negotiations and meetings that occurred. Most of the information about these meetings was published by news outlets or by the press offices of the Council or the Ministries. The information that I am using is intended to be as precise and as independent from biases as possible. Still, there are some limitations and

biases with this information. Overall meetings and negotiations are not always disclosed nor discussed. There is a major limitation with this study and that is that negotiations between heads of government or Ministers in the Council are rarely disclosed. Therefore it is very difficult to establish direct and certain causal effects between meetings and declarations with concrete votes in the Council. Because of this, it does leave a lot of room for speculation on how much it did impact the process of coalition building or what issues were discussed at those meetings.

To do this the paper will use both primary sources, such as speeches or policy papers by the Council or the Polish and Lithuanian ministries, and secondary sources, such as academic papers on the topic. One of the biases of these kinds of information is that of the government that publishes it.

When it comes to specific observations, I am looking for declarations that show support or opposition to either a policy idea or to the topic in question, even if it is outside the context of the Council vote. The way national Ministers speak tends to be very vague and in most cases projected at their national public. Therefore the names of the initiatives are not always mentioned but still, when a government decides to support an initiative, the Minister can be seen supporting that policy in other environments. For example, I expect that if a Minister has talked positively about certain policies at another event beyond the Council, the coalition-building efforts will be potentially successful. At the same time, I am looking for how the government actions change in a country that transitions from a populist to a non-populist government. If the actions are the same that means that populism is not the sole element.

I am also looking for demonstrations of support and collaboration that governments might have shown to each other, not necessarily just the Ministers. For example, if they have participated in conferences or summits together and they have shown sympathy to each other. I will also use meetings between other Ministers and the Heads of Government to assess the situation between Western and Eastern EU members in the process of coalition building. A lack of diplomatic activity would show there is no intention to form a Coalition at the level of the Council.

RESULTS

Having reviewed the literature about coalition building and establishing a theoretical framework, I will go ahead with case analysis. First, I will describe the policy and support by Western countries then examine each government's response to the policy.

The New Migration Pact is one of the major reforms that were promised by Ursula von der Leyen when she was elected as Commission President in 2019. In 2020, the European Commission announced its plans to reform the Asylum and Migration Pact. One of its principal features was a "Solidarity Mechanism", which obliged member states to take refugees from other EU countries; otherwise, they would be able to get monetary compensation for this (European Commission, 2020). The reformation process took four years and it involved various regulations, reforms, statements etc. By a majority vote, the Regulation of the EU Asylum Agency was approved in December 2021. Qualified majority voting also resulted in the adoption of five regulations that constituted the final Migration Pact on third-country issues relating to asylum seekers and migrant protection in May 2024 (APPENDIX).

Germany within this council had particularly Interior Minister Horst Seehofer and his successors who were strong advocates for this policy. They were diplomatically active in garnering support for the reform (Council of the EU, 2020).

Non-Populist Government Attitude: The Lithuanian Perspective

Government attitude

The Lithuanian governments, first by Saulius Skvernelis and then Ingrida Šimonytė have shown a much bigger predisposition to find compromises and vote with the main consensus block regarding the issue of migration (Vilpišauskas, 2022). This was done considering that Lithuania's population and public opinion position itself very strongly against multiculturalism and the presence of Muslims in the work or neighbourhood, 47 % (Andriejauskaitė, 2024). The migrant crisis originating from Belarus presents another significant issue. In recent years, there has been an increase in illegal migrants entering the EU through Lithuania. This situation has heightened the Lithuanian government's concern about collaborating more closely with other EU countries in the development of a common migration policy (Karčiauskas, 2023). According to

Professor Nakrošis, the fact that Lithuania is very dependent on collaboration with EU states and institutions, especially in issues of agency and administrative cooperation means that they require a solid and constructive framework of diplomacy and dialogue (Bortkevičiūtė & Nuotr, 2023).

The Lithuanian Minister of Interior Rita Tamašunienė, expressed in the EU Council Minister of the 8th of October 2020, support for the new plans for Asylum reform by the European Commission. "For persecuted foreign citizens, Lithuania will always be a safe country" (Infolex, 2020). Her successor, Agnė Bilotaitė, continuec with her policies of compromise and moderation. She expressed how important it was to create common mechanisms in the European Union to deal with immigration (Bns, 2023). Irena Segalovičienė, who works as the main policy advisor for President Gitanas Nausedas "A rise in migration numbers isn't what Lithuania is aiming for, especially for the current period, therefore the president prefers a financial solution,". (Bns, 2024) These declarations are good examples of non-populist rhetoric since they address the complexity of the issue and try to find a compromise through negotiation. Instead, they present Lithuania as a country ready to make compromises and negotiate (Karčiauskas, 2023).

Coalition Planning

According to Vilpišauskas (2022), the idea of solidarity and European cooperation is of great importance in the Lithuanian political scene. Therefore confrontation is not rewarded and instead, the finding of a consensus in the Council is preferred. As it has been mentioned before the Lithuanian objectives during the negotiations of the New Migration Pact consisted of influencing the process to not be forced into accepting refugees from the Mediterranean while still accepting some of the concessions (Karčiauskas 2023). To do this they embarked on a series of diplomatic meetings. In February 2020, Minister Rita Tamašunienė met with Commissioner for Home Affairs Ylva Johansson to express Lithuania's support for the proposed migration policy (Pranckevičius, 2020). The meeting was deemed a "Positive and likeminded exchange on common European solutions for migration" and demonstrated the Lithuanian government's readiness to engage actively in the negotiations and discussions surrounding the agreement.

In 2021, while the reform of the Asylum Pact was being discussed and countries such as Germany and France were trying to bring countries to their coalition in the Council a refugee crisis broke down with Belarus and its neighbours. German Interior Minister, Horst Seehofer decided to travel to Lithuania and transmit their full support on this issue. With it, he was able to engage in constructive talks with the Lithuanian government about immigration while the Lituanians thanked his support (Lithuanian Interior Ministry, 2021).

With all of this, Bilotaite, and the Lithuanian were presenting themselves as a serious partner ready to deal with the issue constructively. This does not necessarily imply that issues such as security concerns were not attended to, nevertheless, in the end, Lithuania voted in favour of the Asylum reform (Karčiauskas, 2023).

Ever since the reform was announced by the Commission in 2020, the Lithuanian government, more specifically its Minister of Interior, Agnė Bilotaitė, from the Homeland Union, voted in favour of all the motions brought forward to the Council. Also, Lithuanian government officials have not used populist rhetoric regarding migration policy and allocating Asylum seekers. This does not inherently indicate that there have not been any controversial points when talking about the issues of migration or the vote of Lithuania in the Council (Meidutė-Kavaliauskienė & Činčikaitė, 2023).

In April 2024, when the moment came to vote on the Migration Pact at the European Council, Minister Bilotaite voted in favour of it, together with the majority of the European Union members. After the vote was passed the Lithuanian government maintained strong contacts with the European Commission to ensure that the pact was properly established, furthering their duties with their European partners (Ministry of Interior Lithuania, 2024).

Populist Government: The Poland of Law and Justice

Government attitude

The situation in Poland on the other hand is a bit different. Unlike Lithuania, there was a strong presence of populism in Poland which translated into 8 years of the Law and Justice government. Populism in Poland is greatly influenced by nationalism and conservatism and is not simply limited to anti-establishment politics. This means that for Law and Justice is not only

a question of fighting an elite but a foreign elite that threatens their people and country. When it comes to migration the party has been very vocal since the beginning of its tenure in 2015, about their absolute opposition to accepting migrants coming from Africa or the Middle East (Bill, 2020). The reason for this is that, much like Lithuania, the Polish population is strongly against the acceptance of migrants from Muslim countries, with 45% strongly disagreeing and 25% being moderately against (CBOS, 2017).

Kaczynski and other leaders ha. For example, in 2015, Kaczynski declared that migrants from the Middle East bring "parasites and protozoa " (Cienski, 2016). This kind of language dehumanises migrants and presents Kaczynski as the defender of ordinary people, it also greatly simplifies the issue and tries to appeal to people's fear and prejudices. According to Mikołajczyk and Jagielski (2022), the usage of populist and nationalist rhetoric around migration by PiS members even before they took office in 2015 has had a considerable impact on the levels of polarisation in the country around the issue of migration.

Another aspect of this populism in Poland is the creation of a narrative that portrays the topic of asylum seekers and migration. This rhetoric tends to blame the issue of migration on the European elites, most specifically the German ones, as Kaczynski has repeatedly used the words "Brussels and Berlin"(Euronews, 2021). This alludes to a sense of nationalism and victimhood which energises their support base (Opiłowska & Sus, 2021). He also blames the issue of migration on these elites when he says "If the European elite has not lost the possibility of logical thinking, they are deliberately causing immigrants to arrive," (WNP, 2023).

In the last weeks of the PiS government when it was becoming clear that they were going to be replaced by a centrist coalition, Prime Minister Morawiecki and President Duda had a press meeting in which they referred to the votes as "EU elites imposing their diktat". This presents a vote in the Council as an imposition on Poland and not as a democratic process resulting from diplomacy and negotiation (Tilles, 2023).

Coalition Planning

During the negotiations for the Asylum Reform and the voting that occurred on the 17th of November, Seehofer tried to establish contacts with the Polish Minister. Similar to what

happened in Lithuania, Horst Seehofer went to Poland amidst the border crisis with Belarus and met with Polish Interior Minister Marius Kaminski to communicate his support (Lepiarz, 2021).

However, unlike in Lithuania, where his visit and words of support were reported positively by the Ministry of Interior, in Poland there was a general sense of mistrust. Seehofer had expressed his desire to establish humanitarian corridors to help those refugees at the border with Poland but Kaminski and the Ministry expressed frustration over the negativity of Seehofer taking any of the refugees that had arrived in Poland (Lepiarz, 2021). Unlike Bilotaite, Kaminski and the PiS tried to use it to assert themselves as strong against migration and to criticise the German attitude, insisting instead that Poland should be capable of handling migration by itself. This is connected to the aforementioned national populous, for the PiS anything that resembles an interference of a German official over Polish affairs will be considered a threat to national sovereignty, therefore the PiS politicians will take any opportunity to appear as defensive (Opiłowska & Sus, 2021). This made it impossible for a coalition or a comprehensive agreement to be formed (Lepiarz, 2021).

During the rule of the PiS Poland found allies in other Central European countries and together they tried to establish a block that could attract other members and potentially In 2020, when the Migration Pact was presented by the Commission, Poland tried to create a coalition of opposing countries in the hopes of blocking the measure. After meeting von der Leyen, Morawheicki, together with Viktor Orban from Hungary and Andrzej Babis from Czechia gathered together and expressed their opposition to the plan, expressing that no asylum seeker should be allowed in the EU without previously existing permission (Reuters, 2020). Still, this coalition was not enough and it failed to bring other countries (APPENDIX).

For instance, Italy is another country whose government parties are also categorised as national populists and with anti-migrant views. However, they desire to move those migrants away from Italy, which sometimes might include a distribution throughout Europe. In July 2023, Morawiecki met Italian Prime Minister Meloni. Although Meloni insisted on the ideological similarities between the two countries, she and her government continued to negotiate with Germany and other countries to guarantee a principle of solidarity that allows the distribution of migrants (D'Emilio, 2023). Although not specifying Poland, former Renew Europe President

Sejourne (2023) states how populist rhetoric was constantly derailing the negotiations for a Migrant Pact. This could be seen when in those negotiations Poland attempted to form a "blocking coalition" as described by the government spokesperson, against the pact in the Council and Parliament (Krzysztoszek, 2023).

Post-Populist Government: The Poland of Donald Tusk

Government attitude

In 2023 a new government of the Civil Coalition and its leader Donald Tusk took power and removed the PiS from government. The Civic Coalition (KO) is a pro-European party with its main support base being middle-class and urban professionals and has policies that are described as pro-business and pro-EU and pro-globalisation (Bill, 2020). Therefore, it cannot be labelled as a populist party, and so is also shown by the PopuList database (Rooduijn et al., 2023). The Government was a coalition of the Civic Coalition, with other Left-wing, agrarian and centrist parties, none of them categorised as populist.

Nevertheless, when it came to migration, Tusk and its Minister for the Interior Marcin Kierwiski, maintained the position on migration that had been established by the Morawiecki government. Unlike the previous government, Tusk greatly softened his rhetoric towards the European Institutions, on the issue of migration. Even though his government voted against the Migration Pact in April 2024 he did not try to antagonise the European Institutions and instead endorsed a constructive dialogue. As Minister Kierwiski expressed. "I am glad that Poland is returning to full dialogue with the European institutions" (Ministry of Interior Poland, 2024 March). Even when voting against the Pact, Tusk presented himself as defending the national interest of the Polish people who are against the presence of immigrants from the Mediterranean and not as someone in a fight against a foreign elite (Ptak, 2024).

Coalition Planning

Tusk presented itself as better skilled in the issue of coalition building in the Council and this is the better guarantee that the Pact does not imply forcing Poland to take refugees from other European countries. One of his main points of criticism was the fact that Poland was already harbouring millions of Ukrainian refugees and therefore Poland should not be forced to

receive migrants from Italy or Greece. When it came to Middle Eastern refugees coming from Belarus Tusk insisted that the issue was not about relocating the asylum seekers but instead directly stopping them at the border (Ptak, 2024).

Tusk insisted on his desire and capabilities to form coalitions with his other European colleagues in the hopes of changing some of the aspects of the Pact such as the required solidarity or guarantee of an opt-out for Poland. Since taking office both Tusk and his Foreign Minister, Radosław Sikorski have engaged in a variety of diplomatic meetings with other leaders of European states, such as Romania, Sweden, Latvia and Austria, as well as France and Germany (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2024). Although it was not specified if the issue of migration reform was discussed it can objectively be said that these meetings had the objective of establishing better lines of communication with the other member states.

Tusk's approach was based on the idea that the PiS's rhetoric, defiance of rule law and conflictive attitude were the factors driving the Migration Pact in a direction against Poland's interests. He was convinced that his new diplomacy and connections in Brussels would exempt Poland or that he could alter the structure of the pact. Nevertheless, despite the active foreign policy and engaged diplomacy the "Solidarity mechanism" remained as part of the pact (Mularczyk, 2024). In those circumstances, Donald Tusk, voted against the Migration Pact, breaking away from the consensus and partnering with Hungary and Slovakia (APPENDIX).

Despite this, his government still maintained contact with other states in the case of future reforms. In June 2024, Minister Kierwsiki gathered with 15 other EU Ministers from Central and Eastern Europe and even some from Western Europe and signed a common document that was sent to the European Commission. On it, they insisted on the importance of shifting the tasks and responsibilities of the management of migration to countries outside of the European Union such as Turkey or Tunisia (Ministry of Interior, 2024).

Later, in July 2024, Tusk had a meeting with Chancellor Scholz to further bilateral cooperation. Both leaders agreed to collaborate on the issue of immigration at a European level. While amendments to the Migration Pact were not proposed, increased cooperation between Poland and Germany was seen as a foundation for potential future coalitions (MDR Aktuell, 2024).

Result Assessment

To the EU Council, both Lithuania and Poland show distinct practices of coalition-building. The centre-right government of Lithuania constructively worked with other EU members to get some leniency on certain migration pact aspects. Despite its size, however, Lithuania has key figures like former President Dalia Grybauskaitė who are influential in the decision-making process of the EU. However, it lacks the power to block any action and so must depend on Western states for help regarding Belarus border crossings.

Poland, conversely, under PiS rule focused on populist rhetoric and domestic political gains at the expense of constructive EU engagement as postulated by Cadier (2021). It isolated Poland from this consensus coalition thereby reducing its influence. However, after Tusk's return to power in 2024 Poland's language in the council became more cooperative but voting patterns within the council remained consistent until that time. This depicts efforts by Tusk and the Ministry of Interior aimed at changing that approach.

CONCLUSION

Findings & Summary

The findings made in this paper can be summarised in the following points. Firstly, it can be assessed that populism is a disrupting factor when it comes to coalition building in the Council of the EU. The Polish case shows how the way the Morawiecki government engaged with the rest of the Council did not help in establishing a constructive dialogue and ended up for the most part isolated within the Institution.

This fits well with the theory of foreign policy that Cadier and Lequesne (2021) brought forward. Poland's populism has led the country to a series of radical positions on the topic of migration that make them unwilling to even negotiate in many cases. Nevertheless, it cannot be attested that populism alone was the sole cause of this. By comparing the attitude of the PiS government with that of Tusk I can see that the core of the policies of the Polish government did not change. The Absence of Populism makes for a more constructive negotiation but it does not necessarily change the final result of the vote or the voting coalition as seen with Tusk.

It seems that at the core of this decision was more the national interests of the countries. Tusk feared that appearing too compromising on the issue of immigrating could weaken his political position, therefore, keeping with the general will of the Polish population it decided. Meanwhile, Lithuania did engage in a more constructive dialogue but also because its situation was a bit more compromised. Being such a small country and facing the same issues as Poland it meant that they were more interested in being in good terms with Brussels.

Constraints & Limitations

One of the events that I have been able to gather is connected, but it is difficult to establish a clear chain of connections. Previous authors have used information that was gathered directly from Ministers. This thesis did not have the means to gather that information. Therefore, the study relies on speculation or suppositons based on declarations of officials. The aforementioned lack of literature on coalition building since the early 2010s also complicates the research since dynamics of the last years have not been well covered and this hurts the theory.

At the same time, many of these declarations have been reported by media outlets and governments, introducing a potential bias in the way some of these events were covered and, therefore, the implications they might have on the overall picture. Additionally, the reliance on secondary sources limits the depth of analysis, as primary sources could provide more nuanced insights. The temporal scope of the study is also a limitation, as the evolving political landscape may alter the relevance of the findings. Future research should aim to address these limitations by incorporating direct interviews and a broader array of primary documents.

Future Research

Future research should put a special focus on the political interests of the states when engaging in coalition building. Issues like immigration, economic interests or social policy are much bigger drivers for voting patterns in the Council than the political ideology of the ruling party, confirming Blavoukos and Pagoulatos (2011) assessments.

The case of Poland should also be the subject of further research in the future. It is still too early to see how much this will impact future dynamics in the Council. Since Tusk regained the premiership in December 2023 and the Migration Pact was approved by the Council in April

2024 it is still yet to be seen what the development will be. In that regard, it should be important that the theories of Mudde (2004) regarding the influence that populism has on the zeitgeist of a country. That is the presence that Law and Justice had on Polish society, even when outside of government might have limited the capabilities of Tusk and the KO which might have impacted their decision-making. With populism still present in several CEE countries it will be of relevance to see their impact in European diplomacy once they are gone.

Ultimately, this thesis has possibly contributed to a more nuanced and thorough understanding of the issues that affect the dynamics of coalition building in the Council of the EU and what political factors determine the alliances that are formed in that institution.

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APPENDIX

DATE	Policy Area	Policy Number	Result	Voted Against	Abstentions
14/05/2024	Immigrant Protection	70/23	Approved	Poland Hungary	Czechia Austria Slovakia
14/05/2024	Immigrant Protection	69/23	Approved	Poland Hungary Austria	Czechia Slovakia
14/05/2024	Registration of Third country nationals	22/24	Approved	Poland Hungary	Czechia Slovakia
14/05/2024	Asylum policy	21/24	Approved	Poland Hungary Slovakia	Austria Czechia Malta
14/05/2024	Immigration Regulation	20/24	Approved	Poland Hungary	Czechia Slovakia
14/05/2024	Asylum Regulation	19/24	Approved	Poland Hungary Austria Slovakia	Czechia
14/05/2024	Humanitarian Aid	18/24	Approved	Poland Hungary	Czechia Slovakia
14/05/2024	Return Border Procedure	17/24	Approved	Poland Hungary	Czechia Slovakia
14/05/2024	Immigration Protection	16/24	Approved	Poland Hungary	Czechia Slovakia
14/05/2024	Illegal Immigration	15/24	Approved	Poland Hungary	Czechia Slovakia
09/12/2021	Asylum Reform	61/21	Approved	Poland Hungary Slovakia	Bulgaria Czechia