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Coalition Politics and Crisis Governance: The Dutch Government's Response to EU-led Crisis Management under Rutte III and IV

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**Coalition Politics and Crisis
Governance: The Dutch Government's
Response to EU-Led Crisis Management
under Rutte III and IV**

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1. Introduction

Since it was founded, the European Union (EU) has faced several challenging crises, ranging from the Eurozone crisis and Brexit to more recent crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the Russian invasion of Ukraine.¹ These crises have put pressure on the EU as an organisation, and have tested its capacity, solidarity and willingness to cooperate in times of need. Although the EU has responded with initiatives such as the joint vaccine procurement during the COVID-19 pandemic and coordinated sanctions for Russia, these actions required broad consensus and cooperation among the member states. As such, EU crisis governance has become an increasingly contested space, where national interests and politics shape the extent and form of supranational action.

Although much of the academic literature has focused on the role of EU institutions in crises, less attention has been paid to how internal coalition dynamics within member states influence national preferences and EU-level outcomes.² This thesis aims to fill that gap by examining the Netherlands, a founding member of the EU with a tradition of coalition governance. Specifically, it explores how political dynamics within the Dutch coalition government have shaped the country's approach to EU-led crises during two major crises: the COVID-19 pandemic and the Ukraine crisis. These crises were selected as they span distinct policy domains, such as public health and foreign security, while also occurring under similar conditions, as both crises were governed by cabinets Rutte III and Rutte IV, which were composed of the same four political parties: the VVD, CDA, D66, and ChristenUnie.

The puzzle guiding this thesis is: *How do political dynamics within the Dutch government influence its approach to EU-led crisis management, particularly during major regional crises?* This question invites a closer look at the formation of national preferences within coalition governments, where diverse party ideologies must negotiate a shared position. The central research question becomes: *How do the political dynamics within the Dutch coalition government shape the country's response to EU crisis management during key regional crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the Ukraine crisis?*

¹ Arjen Boin, and Mark Rhinard, "Crisis management performance and the European Union: the case of COVID-19," *Journal of European Public Policy*, 30.4 (2023): 655-656, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2022.2141304>

² Arjen Boin, and Mark Rhinard, "Crisis management performance and the European Union: the case of COVID-19," *Journal of European Public Policy*, 30.4 (2023): 656, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2022.2141304>

In addressing this question, the thesis applies an adapted version of Liberal Intergovernmentalism (LI), focusing on intergovernmental bargaining at the EU and the pre-bargaining process within member state governments. Rather than treating the Dutch government as a unitary actor, this approach highlights how internal negotiations among coalition parties influence the development of national positions. By doing so, this thesis will contribute to EU studies by moving beyond single-actor or institutionalist explanations and offering a coalition-level perspective on EU crisis politics.

The structure of this thesis is as follows. The next chapter, the literature review, reviews the relevant literature on crisis governance, Liberal Intergovernmentalism (LI), EU-level crisis management, and the Dutch political parties. A methodology chapter will follow this with an explanation of the analytical framework and the data used. The research chapters will analyse the Dutch response to the COVID-19 pandemic and the Ukraine crisis, focusing on the internal coalition dynamics. Lastly, the discussion and conclusion chapter will compare the findings across cases and reflect on the implications for understanding national preference formation in national governance responding to EU-led crises.

2. Literature Review

From economic upheavals to geopolitical shocks, the EU has faced a cascade of crises that have tested not only its institutions but also the unity and decisiveness of its member states. For example, the Oil crises of the 1970s, the Empty Chair crisis, and the Migration crisis have been thoroughly debated.³ However, more recent crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the Ukraine crisis have presented new challenges for the EU and its member states. This literature review will explore relevant academic literature on EU crisis governance to provide a basis to understand how national governments, such as the Dutch government, have responded to the COVID-19 pandemic and the Ukraine crisis. This chapter is divided into four sections. First, the terms crisis and crisis governance will be explained. Second, the theory of Liberal Intergovernmentalism will be elaborated as the theoretical framework for understanding EU integration and crisis response. Third, EU crisis governance will be discussed. Lastly, the four governing political parties will be introduced. This literature review will establish the analytical basis for understanding the interplay between coalition dynamics and external crisis policymaking in the Dutch context.

Crisis Governance

According to Boin and Rhinard, “all governance systems, at any level, are likely to face crises that demand a political-strategic response”.⁴ Over the past few decades, the EU has dealt with many crises that have exposed specific vulnerabilities within the national and supranational systems and have tested the government’s abilities to act during times of uncertainty.⁵ Several scholars have defined the term ‘crisis’ differently. However, it can be commonly understood as a situation perceived as a threat to society, institutions or infrastructures, which requires urgent decision-making under uncertainty and time pressure. Wolbers et al., Boin and Rhinard define crisis similarly but differ as Boin and Rhinard are focused on the political dimension, where political actors perceive a threat that demands urgent decision-making from them, which focuses on the actors that solve the crisis.⁶ Wolbers

³ Arjen Boin, and Mark Rhinard, “Crisis management performance and the European Union: the case of COVID-19,” *Journal of European Public Policy*, 30.4 (2023): 655-656, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2022.2141304>

⁴ Arjen Boin, and Mark Rhinard, “Crisis management performance and the European Union: the case of COVID-19,” *Journal of European Public Policy*, 30.4 (2023): 656, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2022.2141304>

⁵ T.B. Akilitan, “Liberal Intergovernmentalism: An Overview of Andrew Moravcsik’s Contribution to International Relations,” *Available at SSRN 3772589* (2020): 4.

⁶ Arjen Boin, and Mark Rhinard, “Crisis management performance and the European Union: the case of COVID-19,” *Journal of European Public Policy*, 30.4 (2023): 657, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2022.2141304>

et al., on the other hand, are focused on those affected by the crisis, defining it as a situation where a community, nation or town is threatened.⁷ Kouzmin's view aligns with the definition given by Wolbers et al., Boin and Rhinard, but highlights that a crisis is a non-routine disruption. Kouzmin explains that a crisis is a situation that brings up "the sheer un-ness" of situations, highlighting the fact that a crisis is "un-scheduled, un-expected, un-operational, and often un-imaginable".⁸ Lastly, Blockmans and Wessel focus on the security dimension of a crisis, as they explicitly mention the use of armed force during a crisis.⁹ Altogether, these definitions underline that crises are not objective conditions, but are also socially and politically constructed situations that overwhelm the routine of decision-making and require a response from a government.

Understanding how crises are defined is crucial to recognise one; however, a definition alone does not explain how governments or institutions like the EU respond to them. As Boin and Rhinard said, crises demand urgent decision-making, coordination, and accountability.¹⁰ This raises the question of how crisis governance is understood. Again, many scholars have defined the term; however, overall crisis management can be understood as the set of processes and responses aimed at mitigating, preparing, responding, and recovering from a crisis.¹¹ Kouzmin, Boin, and Rhinard have specifically identified key tasks that are part of crisis governance. Kouzmin outlines crisis management into four stages: (1) prevention and mitigation, (2) preparation and planning, (3) response and decision-making, and (4) recovery, consolidation and change.¹² Wolbers et al. agree with these four stages but emphasise that crisis management encompasses both the operational aspects of preparedness and recovery and the broader political need for legitimacy and strategic coordination.¹³ Moreover, Boin and

⁷ Jeroen Wolbers, Sanneke Kuipers and Arjen Boin, "A systemic review of 20 years of crisis and disaster research: Trends and progress," *Risk, Hazards & Crisis in Public Policy* 12.4 (2021): 375-376, <https://doi.org/10.1002/rhc3.12244>

⁸ Alexander Kouzmin, "Crisis Management in Crisis?," *Administrative Theory and Praxis*, 30.2 (2008): 155, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10841806.2008.11029631>

⁹ Steven Blockmans, and Ramses A. Wessel, "The European Union and crisis management: Will the Lisbon Treaty make the EU more effective?," *Journal of Conflict & Security Law* 14.2 (2009): 269, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jcsl/krp020>

¹⁰ Arjen Boin, and Mark Rhinard, "Crisis management performance and the European Union: the case of COVID-19," *Journal of European Public Policy*, 30.4 (2023): 657, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2022.2141304>

¹¹ Jeroen Wolbers, Sanneke Kuipers and Arjen Boin, "A systemic review of 20 years of crisis and disaster research: Trends and progress," *Risk, Hazards & Crisis in Public Policy* 12.4 (2021): 375, <https://doi.org/10.1002/rhc3.12244>

¹² Alexander Kouzmin, "Crisis Management in Crisis?," *Administrative Theory and Praxis*, 30.2 (2008): 158, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10841806.2008.11029631>

¹³ Jeroen Wolbers, Sanneke Kuipers and Arjen Boin, "A systemic review of 20 years of crisis and disaster research: Trends and progress," *Risk, Hazards & Crisis in Public Policy* 12.4 (2021): 375, <https://doi.org/10.1002/rhc3.12244>

Rhinard, as well as Blockmans and Wessel, agree with the four stages presented by Kouzmin; however, they define them differently. Boin and Rhinard specifically define crisis management into three phases: (1) the threat detection of a crisis, (2) the mobilisation and coordination of resources and actions, and (3) securing legitimacy for a crisis response among public and political actors.¹⁴ Blockmans and Wessel, on the other hand, are less specific and define crisis management as the “organisation, regulation, procedural frameworks, and arrangements to contain a crisis and shape its future course while resolution is sought”.¹⁵ While the definitions and frameworks offered by these scholars differed in focus, ranging from institutional processes to political perception and societal impact, they collectively point out that crisis management is not merely a technical procedure but a politically charged process shaped by competing interests, uncertainty and the demand for legitimacy.

Liberal Intergovernmentalism

Liberal Intergovernmentalism (LI) is a theory that Andrew Moravcsik developed initially in the 1990s.¹⁶ Moravcsik defines it as a theory of European Integration, which explains policymaking as the outcome of rational intergovernmental bargaining based on national preferences that are formed through domestic political processes and societal interests.¹⁷ European Integration here is understood as the process by which member-states coordinate policies across borders, expand the range of shared policy areas, develop joint decision-making institutions, and adjust domestic policies in response to collective agreements.¹⁸ The theory does not describe nation-states and governments as unitary actors with fixed interests,¹⁹ but as institutions that aggregate the preferences of societal groups through national political processes.²⁰

¹⁴ Arjen Boin, and Mark Rhinard, “Crisis management performance and the European Union: the case of COVID-19,” *Journal of European Public Policy*, 30.4 (2023): 657, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2022.2141304>

¹⁵ Steven Blockmans, and Ramses A. Wessel, “The European Union and crisis management: Will the Lisbon Treaty make the EU more effective?”, *Journal of Conflict & Security Law* 14.2 (2009): 269, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jcsl/krp020>

¹⁶ Marieke Kleine, and Mark Pollack, “Liberal intergovernmentalism and its critics,” *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies* 56.7 (2018): 1493, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.12803>

¹⁷ Andrew Moravcsik, “Preferences and power in the European Community: A liberal intergovernmentalist approach,” *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies* 31.4 (1993): 480, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-5965.1993.tb00477.x>

¹⁸ Andrew Moravcsik, “Preferences and power in the European Community: A liberal intergovernmentalist approach,” *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies* 31.4 (1993): 479, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-5965.1993.tb00477.x>

¹⁹ Marieke Kleine, and Mark Pollack, “Liberal intergovernmentalism and its critics,” *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies* 56.7 (2018): 1495, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.12803>

²⁰ Andrew Moravcsik, “Preferences and power in the European Community: A liberal intergovernmentalist approach,” *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies* 31.4 (1993): 481, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-5965.1993.tb00477.x>

The theory emerged as a direct response to earlier theories of European Integration, of which one was neofunctionalism, presented by Ernst Haas in the 1950s.²¹ The theory described “the spillover effect”, which explains that when there is integration in one area, this will trigger incentives for further integration in other policy areas or institutional levels.²² Similarly, when the EU can prove that cooperation is successful among member states, this will increase the trust in EU institutions. According to the neo-functional theory, this would then lead to deeper integration, as member states are willing to give the EU more authority when it performs well in times of need.²³ Schimmelfennig agrees with this argument and adds to it that neo-functionalism sees crises as opportunities to push EU member-states into further integration, especially when EU institutions are in place to respond.²⁴ However, according to Moravcsik, Schimmelfennig, Kleine and Pollack, the theory is limited as it underestimates the centrality of national governments in shaping the scope of European Integration. Although the theory did explain the early phases of integration, it lacks predictive power and cannot explain the strategic and interest-driven nature of EU integration.²⁵

In contrast, LI is argued to be “the baseline theory” for understanding the process of European Integration.²⁶ What differs LI from neo-functionalism is that LI is state-centric, meaning that the national governments are the central actors,²⁷ as these governments are the ones who strategically pursue economic and political interests within intergovernmental negotiations.²⁸ Within the EU, all member states are expected to cooperate to a certain extent, but that raises the question of the importance and relevance of cooperation and how that works. Cooperation depends on how different policy areas affect the people within a member

²¹ Marieke Kleine, and Mark Pollack, “Liberal intergovernmentalism and its critics,” *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies* 56.7 (2018): 1506, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.12803>

²² Andrew Moravcsik, “Preferences and power in the European Community: A liber intergovernmentalist approach,” *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies* 31.4 (1993): 474-475, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-5965.1993.tb00477.x>

²³ Arjen Boin, and Mark Rhinard, “Crisis management performance and the European Union: the case of COVID-19,” *Journal of European Public Policy*, 30.4 (2023): 660, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2022.2141304>

²⁴ Frank Schimmelfennig, “Liberal intergovernmentalism and the crises of thee European Union,” *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies* 56.7 (2018): 1579, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.12789>

²⁵ Andrew Moravcsik, “Preferences and power in the European Community: A liber intergovernmentalist approach,” *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies* 31.4 (1993): 476, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-5965.1993.tb00477.x>

²⁶ Marieke Kleine, and Mark Pollack, “Liberal intergovernmentalism and its critics,” *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies* 56.7 (2018): 1499, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.12803>; Fabio Franchino, “Challenges to liberal intergovernmentalism,” *European Union Politics* 14.2 (2013): 324, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1465116512465133>

²⁷ T.B. Akilitan, “Liberal Intergovernmentalism: An Overview of Andrew Moravcsik’s Contribution to International Relations,” *Available at SSRN* 3772589 (2020): 2.

²⁸ Andrew Moravcsik, “Preferences and power in the European Community: A liber intergovernmentalist approach,” *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies* 31.4 (1993): 475, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-5965.1993.tb00477.x>

state. When policies are beneficial and cost-efficient, member states will push harder for deeper integration within the EU. However, when the costs are higher and the benefits are unclear or unnoticeable, resistance towards cooperation and integration will grow.²⁹ Thus, for cooperation to be practical, the EU is challenged to attain the best possible outcome for all member states while reconciling conflicts about the precise terms of collaboration.³⁰ Several scholars have agreed that to achieve successful and meaningful cooperation and integration, we must first look at the demands of national governments, as national interests are the most critical factors within the theory of LI.³¹ As mentioned earlier, LI combines two central ideas from international relations theory: it uses a liberal approach to explain how countries form their interests, by looking at what people, groups, and parties want inside each country, and an intergovernmental approach to explain how countries take those interests and negotiate with each other to create agreements or EU institutions. These two ideas are often treated separately, but LI brings them together within a single framework.³² These two approaches offer a nuanced understanding of how internal political dynamics influence external cooperation.

Although Schimmelfenning, Kleine, and Pollack have supported and tested Moravcsik's theory, other scholars have critically discussed its success. As mentioned, the theory focuses on national preference formation and intergovernmental bargaining; however, Naurin, Akilatan and Franchino have highlighted its limitations. Both Naurin and Akilatan critique Moravcsik for the formation of national preferences, arguing that these preferences are not fixed, as they are based on negotiations that may evolve and change over time.³³ Additionally, both mention the concern of focusing too much on the nation-state members as the central actor, as this downplays the influence that other EU institutions and non-state actors have.³⁴

²⁹ Marieke Kleine, and Mark Pollack, "Liberal intergovernmentalism and its critics," *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies* 56.7 (2018): 1496, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.12803>

³⁰ Marieke Kleine, and Mark Pollack, "Liberal intergovernmentalism and its critics," *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies* 56.7 (2018): 1498, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.12803>

³¹ Andrew Moravcsik, "Preferences and power in the European Community: A liberal intergovernmentalist approach," *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies* 31.4 (1993): 481, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-5965.1993.tb00477.x>

³² T.B. Akilatan, "Liberal Intergovernmentalism: An Overview of Andrew Moravcsik's Contribution to International Relations," *Available at SSRN 3772589* (2020): 8.

³³ Daniel Naurin, "Liberal intergovernmentalism in the Councils of the EU: A baseline theory?," *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies* 56.7 (2018): 1527, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.12786>; T.B. Akilatan, "Liberal Intergovernmentalism: An Overview of Andrew Moravcsik's Contribution to International Relations," *Available at SSRN 3772589* (2020): 8.

³⁴ Daniel Naurin, "Liberal intergovernmentalism in the Councils of the EU: A baseline theory?," *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies* 56.7 (2018): 1532, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.12786>; T.B. Akilatan, "Liberal Intergovernmentalism: An Overview of Andrew Moravcsik's Contribution to International Relations," *Available at SSRN 3772589* (2020): 10.

Besides that, Franchino criticises the reality of strategic behaviour, focal points, and institutional influence as being more complex than LI allows it to be.³⁵ Franchino takes the example of the Lisbon Treaty negotiations, where he argues that some states ended up signing the agreement after it was predicted that they would oppose the treaty.³⁶ Although none of these scholars reject the theory of LI, they do argue that its explanatory power could be enhanced by incorporating uncertainty, institutional dynamics and the possibility of evolving state preferences. These critiques provide a helpful framework for applying LI critically, especially in crisis settings where national interests, party politics and institutional pressures are in constant flux.

Although LI traditionally focuses on how national governments negotiate at the EU level, this thesis adapts this logic to investigate how coalition governments internally negotiate preferences before presenting them at the EU level. This approach enables a focus on domestic preference formation and coordination, which is an essential but often overlooked precursor to EU-level positions. This makes LI well-suited to this thesis, as recent EU crises have required member states to balance shared European objectives with domestic political constraints. In the Dutch context, cabinets under Prime Minister Mark Rutte had to reconcile divergent party ideologies while responding to evolving EU-level demands. As a theory, LI provides a suitable framework to analyse how party preferences are shaped and negotiated. EU crisis governance is complex, primarily due to its multi-level structure, limited authority, and different member states. Analysing individual member states is essential to understanding how positions are shaped, which will help explain the EU's overall response to a crisis. The following section will explore this further by focusing on how the EU manages crises and the Netherlands' role in that process.

EU Crisis Governance

When the EU was established, the organisation did not consider crisis detection a core function. However, the EU has focused on expanding its institutional capacity to respond to crises over time. Although the EU was often criticised for being reactive instead of anticipatory, they have developed several instruments and agencies over the past years to

³⁵ Fabio Franchino, "Challenges to liberal intergovernmentalism," *European Union Politics* 14.2 (2013): 334, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1465116512465133>

³⁶ Fabio Franchino, "Challenges to liberal intergovernmentalism," *European Union Politics* 14.2 (2013): 332, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1465116512465133>

enhance its crisis management capabilities.³⁷ To name a few examples, the EU has created the Early Warning and Response System (EWRS) for early warning detection of disease outbreaks, there are horizon-scanning mechanisms employed by agencies such as the European Food and Safety Authority and the EU Satellite Centre, and there are broader coordination mechanisms such as the European Commission and the European External Service.³⁸ Besides that, EU crisis management also includes the European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP) for military operations on the continent.³⁹ Moreover, the EU has focused on the establishment of mechanisms like the Integrated Political Crisis Response System (IPCR) and the role of Directorate-Generals (DGs) during crisis events.⁴⁰ According to Zeilin, the EU's crisis governance often follows an experimentalist model that includes setting broad goals, allowing national adaptation, and facilitating coordination through ongoing reviews, reflections and revisions.⁴¹ This approach has proved that even in times of uncertainty, the EU can adapt to complex and non-hierarchical structures and can be resilient across different policy areas.⁴² Even so, it must be remembered that the EU is not a single unified actor, but a supranational organisation where power is shared among its member states. Because of this, the EU is often limited in power regarding urgent decision-making processes during a crisis, like the recent COVID-19 pandemic and the Ukraine crisis. If we take the neofunctionalism theory, a spillover effect could be created once the EU can prove that it effectively responds to a crisis, this will increase the trust within the organisation and member-states will want deeper integration.⁴³ However, if it is the reverse, member-states will wish to perform individually during a crisis. The EU may want to act with greater autonomy in times of crisis, but it still operates within politically sensitive boundaries, meaning that

³⁷ Arjen Boin, and Mark Rhinard, "Crisis management performance and the European Union: the case of COVID-19," *Journal of European Public Policy*, 30.4 (2023): 658, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2022.2141304>

³⁸ Arjen Boin, and Mark Rhinard, "Crisis management performance and the European Union: the case of COVID-19," *Journal of European Public Policy*, 30.4 (2023): 659, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2022.2141304>

³⁹ Steven Blockmans, and Ramses A. Wessel, "'The European Union and crisis management: Will the Lisbon Treaty make the EU more effective?'," *Journal of Conflict & Security Law* 14.2 (2009): 270, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jcs/lkrp020>

⁴⁰ Arjen Boin, and Mark Rhinard, "Crisis management performance and the European Union: the case of COVID-19," *Journal of European Public Policy*, 30.4 (2023): 660, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2022.2141304>

⁴¹ Jonathan Zeitlin, "EU experimentalist governance in times of crisis," *Europe's Union in Crisis* (2018): 1074, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402382.2016.1181873>

⁴² Jonathan Zeitlin, "EU experimentalist governance in times of crisis," *Europe's Union in Crisis* (2018): 1090, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402382.2016.1181873>

⁴³ Arjen Boin, and Mark Rhinard, "Crisis management performance and the European Union: the case of COVID-19," *Journal of European Public Policy*, 30.4 (2023): 660, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2022.2141304>

responses by the EU often result in delayed and failed actions that reinforce national autonomy.⁴⁴ Zeitlin highlights this problem by emphasising the difficulty of reaching a preferred agreement among different member states within the EU.⁴⁵ Blockmans and Wessel agrees with this and argue that “the Member States have almost always failed the test of unity in the EU’s efforts to resolve conflicts on its borders”.⁴⁶ This leads back to the research question, questioning how political parties within coalition cabinets navigate through an EU crisis. Hence, this thesis builds on crisis governance and LI to examine how domestic preferences shape EU crisis responses. In this case, a look will be taken at the Netherlands. The following section will, therefore, briefly examine the political system of the Netherlands.

Dutch Coalition Politics and European Integration

A fragmented party landscape and a tradition of consensus-driven governance have long shaped coalition politics in the Netherlands. Historically grounded in consociationalism, Dutch governments were characterised by elite cooperation across religious and ideological divides.⁴⁷ However, politics has become more competitive and political in recent years. Instead of working together behind closed doors, parties often debate and negotiate more openly, especially when two parties hold different views. To keep coalition governments working smoothly, formal consultation structures, such as regular meetings known as ‘torentjesoverleg’, have become more common.⁴⁸ This development is highly relevant for understanding the cabinets of Rutte III and Rutte IV, both of which included four political parties: the VVD, known as the conservative Liberal party, the CDA, known as the Christian Democrats, the D66, the progressive pro-European Liberals, and the ChristenUnie (CU), the orthodox protestant party.⁴⁹

⁴⁴ Arjen Boin, and Mark Rhinard, “Crisis management performance and the European Union: the case of COVID-19,” *Journal of European Public Policy*, 30.4 (2023): 662, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2022.2141304>

⁴⁵ Jonathan Zeitlin, “EU experimentalist governance in times of crisis,” *Europe’s Union in Crisis* (2018): 1074, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402382.2016.1181873>

⁴⁶ Steven Blockmans, and Ramses A. Wessel, “The European Union and crisis management: Will the Lisbon Treaty make the EU more effective?”, *Journal of Conflict & Security Law* 14.2 (2009): 266, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jcsl/krp020>

⁴⁷ Rudy B. Andeweg, “Coalition politics in the Netherlands: From accommodation to politicization,” *Acta Politica* 43 (2008): 256.

⁴⁸ Rudy B. Andeweg, “Coalition politics in the Netherlands: From accommodation to politicization,” *Acta Politica* 43 (2008): 266.

⁴⁹ Rudy B. Andeweg, “Coalition politics in the Netherlands: From accommodation to politicization,” *Acta Politica* 43 (2008): 260; Huib Pellikaan, Sarah L. de Lange and Tom WG van der Meer, “The centre does not hold: Coalition politics and party system change in the Netherlands, 2002-12,” *Government and Opposition* 53.2 (2016), 232.

Scholars such as van der Harst and Voerman have highlighted the ambivalent relationship between the Dutch political parties and the EU. The VVD has historically supported economic cooperation but remains sceptical of deeper political integration.⁵⁰ This is still the case in 2017, where the VVD emphasises the limitation of EU influence on core economic tasks.⁵¹ The CDA and ChristenUnie occupy more centrist positions,⁵² supporting cooperation in areas like security and migration while warning against overreach by EU institutions.⁵³ The CDA, while recognising the importance of collaboration in terms of security threats, frames European Integration through a lens of economic fairness and national responsibility, particularly in response to the shortcomings exposed during previous crises, such as the Eurozone crisis.⁵⁴ On the one hand, the ChristenUnie supports European cooperation, but on the other hand, they have strong reservations about perceived overreach. Their 2017 manifesto even calls for scaling back the powers of the European Commission and reasserting the primacy of the member states. Although they value the EU's contribution to peace, they are willing to consider radical measures such as leaving the euro to preserve national sovereignty and public support.⁵⁵ In 2019, the ChristenUnie became more in favour of the Union after joining the European People's Party in the European Parliament.⁵⁶ In 2021, the manifesto sets an optimistic tone towards the EU, emphasising the importance and the strengths that the Union brings to the Netherlands, but again, they emphasise that Brussels should not hold too much power.⁵⁷ D66, by contrast, has long been the most pro-European party among the coalition partners.⁵⁸ The party strongly supports deepening European

⁵⁰ Jan van der Harst and Gerrit Voerman. "Post-war manifestations of Euroscepticism in Germany and the Netherlands, 1950-2021: A comparative approach." *Journal of European Integration History* 28.2 (2022): 353.

⁵¹ VVD. "Zeker Nederland VVD verkiezingsprogramma 2017-2021." (2017): 24, https://www.vvd.nl/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/vvd_verkiezingsprogramma_pages.pdf

⁵² Jan van der Harst and Gerrit Voerman. "Post-war manifestations of Euroscepticism in Germany and the Netherlands, 1950-2021: A comparative approach." *Journal of European Integration History* 28.2 (2022): 354.

⁵³ CDA. "Keuzes voor een beter Nederland, Verkiezingsprogramma 2017-2021." (2017): 34. <https://dnpprepo.ub.rug.nl/10871/1/CDaverkiezingsprogramma2017-2021.pdf>

⁵⁴ CDA. "Keuzes voor een beter Nederland, Verkiezingsprogramma 2017-2021." (2017): 79. <https://dnpprepo.ub.rug.nl/10871/1/CDaverkiezingsprogramma2017-2021.pdf>

⁵⁵ ChristenUnie. "Hoopvol Realistisch, voorstellen voor een samenleving met toekomst, Verkiezingsprogramma 2017-2021." (2017): 9, <https://insite.christenunie.nl/library/download/urn:uuid:b353eeb9-4a0d-4ad3-8835-05aeb4b4225a/verkiezingsprogramma+2017-2021+christenunie.pdf?redirected=1748611294>

⁵⁶ Jan van der Harst and Gerrit Voerman. "Post-war manifestations of Euroscepticism in Germany and the Netherlands, 1950-2021: A comparative approach." *Journal of European Integration History* 28.2 (2022): 358.

⁵⁷ ChristenUnie, "Hoopvol Realistisch, voorstellen voor een samenleving met toekomst, Verkiezingsprogramma 2017-2021," (2017): 9, <https://insite.christenunie.nl/library/download/urn:uuid:b353eeb9-4a0d-4ad3-8835-05aeb4b4225a/verkiezingsprogramma+2017-2021+christenunie.pdf?redirected=1748611294>

⁵⁸ Jan van der Harst and Gerrit Voerman. "Post-war manifestations of Euroscepticism in Germany and the Netherlands, 1950-2021: A comparative approach." *Journal of European Integration History* 28.2 (2022): 358.

Integration and institutional reform.⁵⁹ Their manifestos highlight dissatisfaction with slow decision-making processes, calling for less reliance on national vetoes and more democratic legitimacy through the power of the European Parliament.⁶⁰ For D66, effective EU crisis response is tied to a stronger and more unified supranational framework.⁶¹

The differing party positions create inherent tensions in Dutch EU policy, especially during crises. Although the Netherlands is generally considered more pro-European, van der Harst and Voerman note the persistent tension between domestic political caution and international engagement, particularly in fiscal matters. Although they acknowledge the weaknesses, they argue that the Netherlands should contribute to making the EU a stronger player in global politics.⁶² Brexit, the Eurozone crisis and the Migration crisis have shown how vulnerable the organisation can be; however, all parties agree that the Netherlands should help strengthen the organisation and prepare itself for future crises, but each has different views on how that is put into practice.⁶³ This internal divergence has led to balanced coalition positions that reflect compromise among the parties rather than ideological coherence. Therefore, an analysis of the Dutch response to EU-led crises must begin with understanding party preferences and how those interact within a coalition. This thesis builds on this analysis to examine how the Rutte III and IV cabinets responded to two crises, focusing on how individual political parties shape the national response.

Conclusion

This literature review has discussed four key areas necessary to provide the foundation for understanding how national political dynamics shape EU-level crisis responses. It began by outlining the concept of crisis governance, showing how crises are understood as urgent threats perceived under conditions of uncertainty, and how they demand rapid responses. Building on this, LI was presented as the primary theoretical lens for this thesis. The theory explains how European Integration, as a result of national preference formation and intergovernmental bargaining, highlights the central role of domestic politics in shaping

⁵⁹ D66, “D66 Verkiezingsprogramma 2017-2021,” (December 2016): 131, https://dnpprepo.ub.rug.nl/10864/1/D66_vp_TK2017_def.pdf

⁶⁰ D66, “D66 concept-verkiezingsprogramma 2021-2025,” (September 2020): 122, <https://d66.nl/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/D66-concept-verkiezingsprogramma-2021-regelnummers.pdf>

⁶¹ D66, “D66 concept-verkiezingsprogramma 2021-2025,” (September 2020): 120, <https://d66.nl/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/D66-concept-verkiezingsprogramma-2021-regelnummers.pdf>

⁶² D66, “D66 concept-verkiezingsprogramma 2021-2025,” (September 2020): 122, <https://d66.nl/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/D66-concept-verkiezingsprogramma-2021-regelnummers.pdf>

⁶³ CDA, “Keuzes voor een beter Nederland, Verkiezingsprogramma 2017-2021,” (2017): 34. <https://dnpprepo.ub.rug.nl/10871/1/CDAverkiezingsprogramma2017-2021.pdf>

external action. While LI has been critiqued for downplaying the influence of supranational organisations and simplifying how preferences are formed, it remains a strong framework for tracing state behaviour in the EU, especially during crises.

Additionally, the chapter discussed EU crisis governance specifically, discussing how institutional tools and coordination mechanisms have evolved. However, the EU's layered structure and member-state divergence continue to limit rapid collective action. Finally, the Dutch political system was examined to provide context, focusing on its proportional electoral system, the tradition of coalition governance and the ideological diversity of the parties included in cabinet Rutte III and IV. These features make the Netherlands a compelling case for analysing how domestic coalition dynamics mediate EU crisis policymaking. The following chapter will be the methodology.

3. Methodology

This chapter outlines the methodological approach guiding this thesis, which investigates how political dynamics between individual parties within a coalition government influence national responses to EU-led crisis management. The focus is on the Dutch case, specifically the Rutte III and IV cabinets, which shared the same four coalition parties: the VVD, D66, CDA, and ChristenUnie (CU). Through an analysis of how these parties articulate their positions and negotiate them within the coalition, this study aims to understand how coalition politics shape national responses in the context of EU crises. The research proceeds in two analytical steps: first, identifying each coalition party's initial positions on major crisis-related issues; and second, tracing how these positions interact and evolve within the coalition to form a collective response. This two-level analysis mirrors the logic of LI but is applied at the domestic level, with political parties as the core actors. The remainder of the chapter explains the rationale for case selection, outlines the data sources and collection methods, and describes the analytical strategy.

Case selection

To answer the research question, this thesis examines two major crises that occurred within the EU during the tenures of the Rutte III and IV cabinets: the COVID-19 pandemic and the Ukraine crisis. These two cases were selected based on relevance, empirical variation, and methodological coherence. This section will discuss several reasons for the case selection.

The primary reason for selecting these cases is their clear and sustained relevance at the EU level. Each crisis has prompted significant institutional engagement from the EU, requiring collective decision-making, resource coordination and policy responses that extended beyond national borders. These crises offer a helpful way to see how national governments, in this case the Netherlands, respond to EU decision-making during times of uncertainty. These crises substantially impact each EU country, making them a good starting point for understanding how national positions are shaped from within. They generated considerable domestic political debates, public attention and governmental activity, offering rich empirical material for tracing policy positions and coalition negotiations within the Dutch context. The third criterion is the temporal overlap, as both crises occurred under the Rutte III and Rutte IV governments, which shared an identical coalition composition, comprising the VVD, D66, CDA, and CU. Because the same parties were in government during both crises, it becomes

easier to compare how the coalition acted in each case without changes in cabinet composition affecting the outcome. Lastly, the crises selected relate to different policy areas.

In contrast, the COVID-19 pandemic relates to public health, and the Ukraine crisis concerns foreign security; each case analysis will offer a broad view of how the national governments responded in the different contexts. This variation enhances the analytical depth of this study by enabling cross-sectoral comparison. It allows for an assessment of whether and how the nature of the crisis domain shaped Dutch coalition positions and their articulation in EU-level decision-making. The selection of these two crises supports a structured, focused comparison that balances empirical richness with analytical clarity while remaining grounded in the broader theoretical concern of how domestic coalitions shape national preferences in EU crisis governance.

Data Sources and Collection

This thesis draws on a diverse set of primary and secondary sources that will be combined to analyse the political dynamics within the Dutch coalition cabinets. The data collection strategy aims to trace how party-level preferences were articulated, negotiated, and ultimately expressed through Dutch positions in EU crisis policymaking. First, the primary sources form the empirical core of this thesis; examples are the political party manifestos from the four parties from 2017, 2021 and 2023. These manifestos are used to understand the party positions on specific topics concerning the two crises, as these are crucial to understanding how compromises were made during coalition negotiations. Moreover, official coalition agreements from Rutte III and IV are analysed to examine the negotiated policy framework that guided cabinet-level decision-making. Government statements and press conferences during crises offer a real-time look at how the cabinet communicated its responses to the public. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, regular press briefings by Prime Minister Rutte and other ministers revealed the content and tone of the Dutch government's evolving position. Lastly, parliamentary debates and motions, especially those referencing EU policies or positions during the crisis, are analysed to trace how the Dutch government framed its role in EU crisis coordination and how various coalition parties engaged with supranational proposals. These sources will clarify whether Dutch positions aligned or diverged from each other and the EU strategies. Besides that, secondary sources such as scholarly articles, academic books, and policy analyses provide theoretical framing and contextual background. In addition, reports from Dutch media outlets, particularly NOS,

NRC Handelsblad, and De Volkskrant, corroborate timelines, public discourse, and key political developments. Collectively, primary and secondary sources were collected through publicly accessible platforms, including party websites, the Dutch parliamentary archive, government portals, EU institutional websites and the University Catalogue. Using a mix of sources helps triangulation and strengthens the analysis by including formal statements and more dynamic expressions of political positioning.

Analytical approach

This thesis adopts a qualitative policy analysis approach to trace how political parties shape a unified government response to two EU crises. This analysis is grounded in an interpretive tradition that focuses on identifying preferences and outcomes and understanding how political actors construct, negotiate, and justify their positions during times of uncertainty.

At the centre of this thesis, this research is interested in how crisis-related policies emerge within coalition settings. A policy is a course of action or a set of directives given by, for example, a government to guide a plan, to achieve a specific goal or to manage societal issues.⁶⁴ Policies that emerge through processes of social construction, particularly those involving the problematisation of the problems, are especially relevant here, as these are the most prevalent forms of policymaking during crises.⁶⁵ Policy analysis can be understood as the practice of studying those policies and decision-making processes to understand their effectiveness, design, or consequences.⁶⁶ As explained by Yanow, policy analysis looks at the relevance of a policy, however, interpretive policy analysis takes it up to another level by additionally focusing “on the methods through which the analyst or researcher accesses and generates these meanings and analyses them”.⁶⁷ Rather than treating policy as a technical outcome, interpretive analysis views policies as texts embedded with meaning. This thesis pays close attention to the narratives, language, and framing employed by political actors, particularly through the data selection as mentioned before, to examine whether there is any form of consistency, change or influence that political parties bring to coalition formations.⁶⁸

⁶⁴ Amani Abu Jabal, et al, “Methods and tools for policy analysis,” *ACM Computing Surveys (CSUR)* 51.6 (2019): 2; Carl Patton, David Sawicki, and Jennifer Clark, “The Policy Analysis Process,” in *Basic Methods of Policy Analysis and Planning*, (Routledge, 2015), 21-22.

⁶⁵ Jennifer Browne, et al, “A guide to policy analysis as a research method,” *Health promotion international* 34.5 (2019): 1033.

⁶⁶ Dvora Yanow, “Interpretation in policy analysis: On methods and practice,” *Critical policy analysis* 1.1 (2007): 111.

⁶⁷ Dvora Yanow, “Interpretation in policy analysis: On methods and practice,” *Critical policy analysis* 1.1 (2007): 111.

⁶⁸ Amani Abu Jabal, et al, “Methods and tools for policy analysis,” *ACM Computing Surveys (CSUR)* 51.6 (2019): 2.

These sources will be analysed not only for their content but also for how they reflect how parties shaped, debated and defended their positions in response to EU initiatives.⁶⁹ In line with Yanow's interpretive lens, this research maintains a reflexive posture, acknowledging that analysis itself is a co-productive process that is shaped by the researcher's perspective.⁷⁰ To do so, this thesis will explain the coalition's response to the crisis. After that, a two-step analytical structure will follow. First, it will identify the positions of each coalition party using sources like party manifestos, public statements, and news articles, as these materials offer insight into the ideological commitments and policy priorities before and during the crisis. Second, the analysis will trace how these party preferences were negotiated and reconciled within the coalition using sources like coalition agreements, government communications and press conferences. This step explores how internal party dynamics shaped the collective government response and how unified positions were projected in EU-level interactions.

Three specific techniques will be of use to conduct this interpretive policy analysis. First, close document analysis of primary materials, such as the party manifestos, is undertaken to understand policy preferences, the party positions and the institutional positioning. Second, media discourse analysis assesses how these preferences and narratives were communicated to society, particularly during peak moments of crisis. Media sources can offer insight into how coalition actors' actions were framed. Third, comparative analysis will be conducted, including within-case and cross-case comparisons. As explained by Hopkins, to provide a comparative analysis, each crisis must be analysed first to trace internal dynamics, which will be followed by a cross-case comparison to identify any consistent patterns or notable deviations from the cases.⁷¹ The goal is not merely to explain the outcomes of each crisis but to understand how different types of crises and salience levels influence coalition behaviours. Hopkin describes that there are different types of comparative analysis: the method of difference, method of agreement, method of concomitant variations, and the most similar and most different methods.⁷² This thesis will focus on the most similar and most different

⁶⁹ Jennifer Browne, et al, "A guide to policy analysis as a research method," *Health promotion international* 34.5 (2019): 1038.

⁷⁰ Dvora Yanow, "Interpretation in policy analysis: On methods and practice," *Critical policy analysis* 1.1 (2007): 111.

⁷¹ John Hopkin, "The comparative method," in *Theory and Methods in Political Science*, ed. David Marsh and Gerry Stoker (Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 290.

⁷² John Hopkin, "The comparative method," in *Theory and Methods in Political Science*, ed. David Marsh and Gerry Stoker (Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 291-292.

methods that draw inspiration from Mill's method of difference and agreement.⁷³ The most different and similar systems select cases that are either significantly different or similar to one another in key contextual variables, such as political systems or cultures. The rationale behind this method, as explained by Hopkin, is that holding systemic factors constant will help the researcher isolate the causes of variation in the dependent variable.⁷⁴ In this thesis, both cases occur in the same national and institutional context, under Dutch coalition governments led by Prime Minister Rutte and within EU crisis governance. This approach allows comparison while keeping the broader political system the same. This way, the analysis can focus on how different crises have created national preferences and policy choices.

In addition, qualitative comparative analysis will be used. According to Hopkins and Rihoux et al., qualitative comparative analysis (QCA) treats each case as a complex configuration of interacting variables. Hopkin emphasises that qualitative approaches such as QCA are well-suited for studying political phenomena within their specific contexts, particularly when statistical methods are not applicable, as is the case here. While this thesis does not apply LI as a formal model, as discussed in the literature review, its logic of sequential preference formation and interstate negotiation informs the structure of the analysis. Here, a similar two-step logic is applied at the domestic level by analysing the party preferences and then tracing how these are negotiated into a collective and coherent government position. This diverse analytical approach will provide the framework for understanding how a government has made decisions.

Limitations

Although this methodology is well-suited to the research question, limitations must be discussed to acknowledge how these may influence the thesis. The limitations mainly concern data constraints and methodological trade-offs.

First, this study relies heavily on publicly available data sources such as political party manifestos, government documents, press conferences and news articles. Although these sources provide valuable insights into the positions of the political parties and the response from the government, the sources might overlook the behind-the-scenes negotiations, which

⁷³ John Hopkin, "The comparative method," in *Theory and Methods in Political Science*, ed. David Marsh and Gerry Stoker (Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 293.

⁷⁴ John Hopkin, "The comparative method," in *Theory and Methods in Political Science*, ed. David Marsh and Gerry Stoker (Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 293.

are not officially documented. The absence of interview data also means that some aspects of intra-coalition dynamics may remain speculative, particularly given the complexity of coalition governance. Furthermore, the crises examined are ongoing or recent, so the available data represents only a snapshot in time, potentially missing longer-term developments or retrospective reflections.

Second, using the most similar system design introduces specific conceptual challenges. As Jonathan Hopkin notes, even cases that appear institutionally identical may differ in subtle but important ways, creating the problem of overdetermination, where too many potential explanatory factors are at play. This can complicate the isolation of variables that shape outcomes. Yet, when applied with theoretical care and contextual awareness, this comparative approach is still a powerful tool for understanding how political processes unfold in comparable situations.

Finally, this thesis takes a qualitative rather than a quantitative approach, meaning that findings are interpretive and context-specific. Although this allows deep engagement with political dynamics, it also limits the generalisability of the results.

Conclusion

To conclude, this study selects the COVID-19 pandemic and the Ukraine crisis as its two cases to answer the research question. Qualitative analysis will be provided, using different data sources, including party manifestos, coalition agreements, news articles, and journal articles. To trace how the Dutch political parties have shaped the government's response to the two crises, this thesis adopts a multi-layered analytical approach, using policy analysis combined with document analysis, media discourse analysis and comparative case analysis.

4. Research Chapter: The COVID-19 Pandemic

In December 2019, reports of a new illness began circulating from Wuhan, China. On New Year's Eve 2019, the Chinese authorities had officially alerted the World Health Organisation (WHO), which identified the coronavirus by the 7th of January 2020.⁷⁵ Shortly after, on the 9th of January, the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC) reported information on the new virus, but suggested that although cases in Europe were likely, the risk of widespread transmission remained low.⁷⁶ This initial underestimation was echoed by many European leaders, who viewed this situation based on previous outbreaks such as SARS in 2003, which had remained largely in Asia.⁷⁷ In the Netherlands, the Dutch Minister of Medical Care and Sports, Bruno Bruins, trusted the reports from the ECDC and WHO and argued that the chance of the virus entering Europe would be low.⁷⁸ However, this assumption was quickly proven wrong as infections began appearing across Europe, including the Netherlands, which recorded its first case on the 27th of February 2020.⁷⁹ By March 11, the WHO had officially classified COVID-19 as a global pandemic.⁸⁰

In the Netherlands, the government responded by introducing what became known as an “intelligent lockdown” in March 2020.⁸¹ Unlike the full lockdowns imposed by neighbouring countries, the Dutch approach relied heavily on individual responsibility rather than strict enforcement. The Dutch citizens were asked to maintain physical distance, work from home, and avoid unnecessary travel, while many sectors of public life remained operational with

⁷⁵ Arjen Boin, and Mark Rhinard, “Crisis management performance and the European Union: the case of COVID-19,” *Journal of European Public Policy*, 30.4 (2023): 663, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2022.2141304>

⁷⁶ Arjen Boin, and Mark Rhinard, “Crisis management performance and the European Union: the case of COVID-19,” *Journal of European Public Policy*, 30.4 (2023): 663, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2022.2141304>; Christof Schmidt, “8 - Van harte beterschap, EU! (Coronacrisis).” In *Dé EU bestaat niet, Hoe democratisch is de Europese politiek?* (Uitgeverij de Arbeiderspers, 2023), 200.

⁷⁷ Qian Hu, and Yihong Liu, “Crisis management and national responses to COVID-19: Global perspectives,” *Public Performance & Management Review* 45.4 (2022): 737; Rebecca Forman and Elias Mossialos, “The EU response to COVID-19: from reactive policies to strategic Decision-Making,” *Journal of Common Market Studies* 59 (2021): 59, DOI: 10.1111/jcms.13259

⁷⁸ Thijs Broer, and Peter Kee. *Code Rood, het verhaal achter het corona-beleid*. (Uitgeverij Pluim, 2021), 9.

⁷⁹ Christof Schmidt, “8 - Van harte beterschap, EU! (Coronacrisis).” In *Dé EU bestaat niet, Hoe democratisch is de Europese politiek?* (Uitgeverij de Arbeiderspers, 2023), 199.

⁸⁰ Krzysztof Goniewicz, et al, “Current response and management decisions of the European Union to the COVID-19 outbreak: a review,” *Sustainability* 12.9 (2020): 3.

⁸¹ Merel van Hulzen, Kirsten Rohde, and Job van Exel, “Het Nederlandse coronabeleid als sociaal dilemma,” *VGE Bulletin* 37.2 (2020): 17.

safety measures in place.⁸² This more measured response became a defining feature of the Dutch strategy and a point of domestic and international discussion. Cabinet Rutte III, a coalition of four ideologically distinct parties, led the crisis. The internal differences between the coalition parties made the Dutch government's response to this EU-level crisis interesting. The COVID-19 pandemic, therefore, is a valuable case to analyse how coalition parties negotiate and individually influence the Dutch response to this crisis. The following sections will examine EU-level responses, the Dutch governmental actions, and the coalition party dynamics during the pandemic.

EU Crisis Governance during COVID-19

The pandemic was quite challenging for the EU, revealing the institution's limitations in EU crisis governance.⁸³ One limitation presented itself initially, as the crisis was considered a health crisis. This made it difficult for the EU to act on it since health policy is traditionally within national competence.⁸⁴ However, what worked successfully was the different EU agencies that flagged the virus early on. The ECDC and the European Medicines Agency (EMA) began issuing alerts and calls for coordination as early as January 2020; however, many member states did not take the threat of the virus seriously.⁸⁵ Besides that, the Early Warning and Response System (EWRS) also flagged the virus, but again, these signals did not call for immediate action.⁸⁶ The member states responded individually, prioritising national interests such as closing their borders and competing for medical resources.⁸⁷ As many scholars noted, the crisis was initially met with a fragmented 'every state for itself' reaction.⁸⁸

⁸² "Letterlijke tekst persconferentie minister-president Rutte, ministers Grapperhaus, De Jonge and Van Rijn over aangescherpte maatregelen coronavirus." Rijksoverheid, last modified March 23, 2020. <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/onderwerpen/coronavirus-tijdlijn/documenten/mediateksten/2020/03/23/persconferentie-minister-president-rutte-ministers-grapperhaus-de-jonge-en-van-rijn-over-aangescherpte-maatregelen-coronavirus>

⁸³ Rebecca Forman and Elias Mossialos, "The EU response to COVID-19: from reactive policies to strategic Decision-Making," *Journal of Common Market Studies* 59 (2021): 56, DOI: 10.1111/jcms.13259

⁸⁴ Lucia Quaglia, and Amy Verdun, "The COVID-19 pandemic and the European Union: politics, policies and institutions," *Journal of European Public Policy* 30.4 (2023): 599.

⁸⁵ Rebecca Forman and Elias Mossialos, "The EU response to COVID-19: from reactive policies to strategic Decision-Making," *Journal of Common Market Studies* 59 (2021): 58, DOI: 10.1111/jcms.13259

⁸⁶ Rebecca Forman and Elias Mossialos, "The EU response to COVID-19: from reactive policies to strategic Decision-Making," *Journal of Common Market Studies* 59 (2021): 59, DOI: 10.1111/jcms.13259; Arjen Boin, and Mark Rhinard, "Crisis management performance and the European Union: the case of COVID-19," *Journal of European Public Policy*, 30.4 (2023): 664, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2022.2141304>

⁸⁷ Rebecca Forman and Elias Mossialos, "The EU response to COVID-19: from reactive policies to strategic Decision-Making," *Journal of Common Market Studies* 59 (2021): 60, DOI: 10.1111/jcms.13259

⁸⁸ Christof Schmidt, "8 - Van harte beterschap, EU! (Coronacrisis)." In *Dé EU bestaat niet, Hoe democratisch is de Europese politiek?* (Uitgeverij de Arbeiderspers, 2023), 200-201.

Despite this early lack of collective coordination, a more unified European response emerged over time, as the situation quickly turned from a health crisis towards a socio-economic one.⁸⁹ One of the first responses was in March 2020, when a coronavirus response team was formed at the political level.⁹⁰ Later on, the EU mobilised several instruments such as the joint procurement strategies for vaccines via the rescEU mechanism, the activation of the Integrated Political Crisis Response (IPCR) mechanism for coordination, and the creation of SURE, which was a temporary instrument to support employment across member states.⁹¹ However, as LI argued, meaningful EU-level action requires consensus among member states, which was often difficult during this crisis, especially in establishing the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF). The €750 billion fund, designed to support post-pandemic economic recovery, financed through common debt, was a remarkable step in EU fiscal integration.⁹² However, this was not without complex negotiations and compromises among the member states.⁹³ The initial hesitation of countries like the Netherlands, Austria, and Germany to provide unconditional financial support at the start of the crisis to harder-hit southern countries, such as Italy and Spain, exemplified the dynamic between the northern and southern European countries.⁹⁴ The hesitation of the Rutte III cabinet towards these EU proposals of joint debt instruments highlights the intergovernmental nature of the organisation, as national governments determine EU decision-making.⁹⁵

Initially hampered by institutional fragmentation and national divergence, the EU proved that under sufficient pressure, integration can deepen, even in sensitive policy areas such as health and finance.⁹⁶ As Boin and Rhinard note, the EU eventually fulfilled the core tasks of effective crisis governance; their mechanisms detected the threat, mobilised significant

⁸⁹ Lucia Quaglia, and Amy Verdun, “The COVID-19 pandemic and the European Union: politics, policies and institutions,” *Journal of European Public Policy* 30.4 (2023): 600; Arjen Boin, and Mark Rhinard, “Crisis management performance and the European Union: the case of COVID-19,” *Journal of European Public Policy*, 30.4 (2023): 665, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2022.2141304>

⁹⁰ Rebecca Forman and Elias Mossialos, “The EU response to COVID-19: from reactive policies to strategic Decision-Making,” *Journal of Common Market Studies* 59 (2021): 61, DOI: 10.1111/jcms.13259

⁹¹ Krzysztof Goniewicz, et al, “Current response and management decisions of the European Union to the COVID-19 outbreak: a review,” *Sustainability* 12.9 (2020): 4-5.

⁹² Christof Schmidt, “8 - Van harte beterschap, EU! (Coronacrisis).” In *Dé EU bestaat niet, Hoe democratisch is de Europese politiek?* (Uitgeverij de Arbeiderspers, 2023), 212.

⁹³ Klaus Dodds, et al, “The COVID-19 pandemic: Territorial, political and governance dimensions of the crisis,” *Territory, Politics, Governance* 8.3 (2020): 291.

⁹⁴ Christof Schmidt, “8 - Van harte beterschap, EU! (Coronacrisis).” In *Dé EU bestaat niet, Hoe democratisch is de Europese politiek?* (Uitgeverij de Arbeiderspers, 2023), 205.

⁹⁵ Thijs Broer, and Peter Kee. *Code Rood, het verhaal achter het corona-beleid*. (Uitgeverij Pluim, 2021), 27.

⁹⁶ Lucia Quaglia, and Amy Verdun, “The COVID-19 pandemic and the European Union: politics, policies and institutions,” *Journal of European Public Policy* 30.4 (2023): 606.

resources, and regained legitimacy through coordinated action.⁹⁷ However, the path towards these outcomes was neither automatic nor supranationally led, as it resulted from hard-fought intergovernmental negotiations shaped by domestic political constraints of each member state. In this light, we must realise that a virus does not stop at a neighbour's border.⁹⁸ The response by the EU reflects crisis governance under LI, as it shows that EU-level action is dependent on the willingness of national governments to cooperate and compromise, as the organisation itself does not hold the power to rule on its own.⁹⁹ This crisis, in particular, showed that solidarity and cooperation are key to EU crisis governance.¹⁰⁰

Dutch Governmental Response

The Dutch government, led by the Rutte III cabinet, took a centralised approach to manage the crisis. Most decisions were made by the cabinet and the Outbreak Management Team (OMT), with little parliamentary debate initially. This pattern reflected what happened in the rest of Europe, since the urgency and uncertainty of the pandemic led many governments to bypass standard procedures to be able to act more quickly.¹⁰¹ On March 12 2020, the government implemented its first primary nationwide measures, including a ban on events with more than 100 people, the closure of museums and theatres, and a recommendation for those with symptoms to stay at home.¹⁰² These steps were communicated directly to the public through televised press conferences led by Prime Minister Mark Rutte (VVD) and Health Minister Bruno Bruins (VVD), who was later succeeded by Hugo de Jonge (CDA). A week later, additional measures followed, such as school closures and the shutdown of sports

⁹⁷ Lucia Quaglia, and Amy Verdun, "The COVID-19 pandemic and the European Union: politics, policies and institutions," *Journal of European Public Policy* 30.4 (2023): 605.

⁹⁸ Christof Schmidt, "8 - Van harte beterschap, EU! (Coronacrisis)." In *Dé EU bestaat niet, Hoe democratisch is de Europese politiek?* (Uitgeverij de Arbeiderspers, 2023), 202; Lucia Quaglia, and Amy Verdun, "The COVID-19 pandemic and the European Union: politics, policies and institutions," *Journal of European Public Policy* 30.4 (2023): 603.

⁹⁹ Arjen Boin, and Mark Rhinard, "Crisis management performance and the European Union: the case of COVID-19," *Journal of European Public Policy*, 30.4 (2023): 669, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2022.2141304>

¹⁰⁰ Lucia Quaglia, and Amy Verdun, "The COVID-19 pandemic and the European Union: politics, policies and institutions," *Journal of European Public Policy* 30.4 (2023): 600-601.

¹⁰¹ Nicole Bolleyer, and Orsolya Salát, "Parliaments in times of crisis: COVID-19, populism and executive dominance," *West European Politics* 44.5-6 (2021): 1106.

¹⁰² "Letterlijke tekst persconferentie minister-president Rutte en minister Bruins naar aanleiding van de maatregelen tegen verspreiding coronavirus in Nederland." Rijksoverheid, last modified March 12, 2020. <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/onderwerpen/coronavirus-tijdlijn/documenten/mediateksten/2020/03/12/persconferentie-minister-president-rutte-en-minister-bruins-naar-aanleiding-van-de-maatregelen-tegen-verspreiding-coronavirus-in-nederland>; Thijs Broer, and Peter Kee. *Code Rood, het verhaal achter het corona-beleid*. (Uitgeverij Pluim, 2021), 38.

and hospitality venues such as restaurants and cafes.¹⁰³ The Dutch approach was branded as an “intelligent lockdown”, relying more on public responsibility than legal enforcement and distinguishing itself from the stricter lockdowns seen in neighbouring countries.¹⁰⁴

Despite the early preparedness plans that were already on the table after past outbreaks, such as SARS in 2003 and the flu epidemic in 2007,¹⁰⁵ the government was unprepared for the scale and the speed of the crisis.¹⁰⁶ Early efforts to contain the pandemic were improvised and adjusted over time, which revealed gaps in coordination and limitations of the early warning mechanisms.¹⁰⁷ Although EU agencies such as the ECDC had issued alerts, national responses, including that of the Netherlands, were slow to escalate, underestimating the threat and assuming the virus might be regionally contained.¹⁰⁸

Internationally, the Dutch government initially took a cautious stance in EU-level crisis discussions. While supportive of joint responses in principle, the Netherlands hesitated to endorse early proposals for unconditional financial solidarity with harder-hit member states.¹⁰⁹ However, as the pandemic progressed and the socio-economic impact deepened, the Dutch position shifted toward supporting broader coordination within the EU framework, including participation in initiatives such as the joint vaccine procurement and the recovery fund.¹¹⁰

The approach of Rutte III to the pandemic started cautiously and mainly focused on the national control of the virus;¹¹¹ however, over time, they began to focus more on stronger EU

¹⁰³ “Aanvullende maatregelen onderwijs, horeca, sport.” Rijksoverheid, last modified March 15, 2020. <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/actueel/nieuws/2020/03/15/aanvullende-maatregelen-onderwijs-horeca-sport>; Thijs Broer, and Peter Kee. *Code Rood, het verhaal achter het corona-beleid*. (Uitgeverij Pluim, 2021), 44.

¹⁰⁴ “Letterlijke tekst persconferentie minister-president Rutte, ministers Grapperhaus, De Jonge and Van Rijn over aangescherpte maatregelen coronavirus.” Rijksoverheid, last modified March 23, 2020. <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/onderwerpen/coronavirus-tijdlijn/documenten/mediateksten/2020/03/23/persconferentie-minister-president-rutte-ministers-grapperhaus-de-jonge-en-van-rijn-over-aangescherpte-maatregelen-coronavirus>

¹⁰⁵ Thijs Broer, and Peter Kee. *Code Rood, het verhaal achter het corona-beleid*. (Uitgeverij Pluim, 2021), 14.

¹⁰⁶ Thijs Broer, and Peter Kee. *Code Rood, het verhaal achter het corona-beleid*. (Uitgeverij Pluim, 2021), 77.

¹⁰⁷ Thijs Broer, and Peter Kee. *Code Rood, het verhaal achter het corona-beleid*. (Uitgeverij Pluim, 2021), 79.

¹⁰⁸ Rebecca Forman and Elias Mossialos, “The EU response to COVID-19: from reactive policies to strategic Decision-Making,” *Journal of Common Market Studies* 59 (2021): 59, DOI: 10.1111/jcms.13259

¹⁰⁹ NOS, “Hoekstra: te weinig empathisch geweest, schouder aan schouder met Zuid-Europa,” *NOS*, March 31, 2020, <https://nos.nl/artikel/2328951-hoekstra-te-weinig-empathisch-geweest-schouder-aan-schouder-met-zuid-europa>

¹¹⁰ Lucia Quaglia, and Amy Verdun, “The COVID-19 pandemic and the European Union: politics, policies and institutions,” *Journal of European Public Policy* 30.4 (2023): 600; Arjen Boin, and Mark Rhinard, “Crisis management performance and the European Union: the case of COVID-19,” *Journal of European Public Policy*, 30.4 (2023): 665, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2022.2141304>

¹¹¹ Lucia Quaglia, and Amy Verdun, “The COVID-19 pandemic and the European Union: politics, policies and institutions,” *Journal of European Public Policy* 30.4 (2023): 602.

cooperation. This change did not happen overnight, as it was shaped by challenges such as managing the virus, protecting the economy, and responding to society. What influenced this shift were the political dynamics within the Rutte II cabinet. To understand how the Dutch government took certain positions during the crisis, we need to look at how domestic political debates played out, which will be the focus of the next section.

Internal Dynamics within the Rutte III Cabinet

Although the early responses to the pandemic were unified with the public, there were more complex and tense negotiations and discussions among the four governing parties behind closed doors. Each party has a different political agenda, but priorities must be shaped in crisis policymaking. In the initial stages of the pandemic, crisis management was mainly in the hands of Prime Minister Mark Rutte (VVD), Health Minister Bruno Bruins (VVD), and later Hugo de Jonge (CDA), alongside Minister of Justice and Security Ferdinand Grapperhaus (CDA).¹¹² These figures were the public face of the response, delivering regular press conferences and implementing emergency measures. However, behind closed doors, tensions emerged with other coalition members, particularly over the scope and cost of the government's actions.

First, Wopke Hoekstra, as the Minister of Finance (CDA), was involved in the negotiations of the EU's recovery fund. His initial scepticism on unconditional financial support for the southern European countries, such as Italy and Spain, was criticised extensively on the international stage and framed the Netherlands as lacking empathy and solidarity.¹¹³ Hoekstra, from the beginning of this cabinet, was not very popular in the EU as he was known for his strong position on finance, especially on the support for southern European countries.¹¹⁴ At the start of the pandemic, the minister questioned his European colleagues why the other member states had not built financial buffers for crises like these.¹¹⁵ The Netherlands, on the other hand, did provide those buffers as Hoekstra announced in the Tweede Kamer that he was willing to put in an infinite amount of money to support the Dutch economy through the pandemic.¹¹⁶ The Minister received many critiques, also from his colleague faction leader

¹¹² Thijs Broer, and Peter Kee. *Code Rood, het verhaal achter het corona-beleid*. (Uitgeverij Pluim, 2021), 87.

¹¹³ NOS, "Hoekstra: te weinig empathisch geweest, schouder aan schouder met Zuid-Europa," *NOS*, March 31, 2020,

<https://nos.nl/artikel/2328951-hoekstra-te-weinig-empathisch-geweest-schouder-aan-schouder-met-zuid-europa>

¹¹⁴ Thijs Broer, and Peter Kee. *Code Rood, het verhaal achter het corona-beleid*. (Uitgeverij Pluim, 2021), 27.

¹¹⁵ Christof Schmidt, "8 - Van harte beterschap, EU! (Coronacrisis)." In *Dé EU bestaat niet, Hoe democratisch is de Europese politiek?* (Uitgeverij de Arbeiderspers, 2023), 205.

¹¹⁶ Thijs Broer, and Peter Kee. *Code Rood, het verhaal achter het corona-beleid*. (Uitgeverij Pluim, 2021), 29.

Gert-Jan Segers of ChristenUnie, who argued that the Netherlands had to support their European brothers and claimed that “it was time for a Marshall Plan” for the Southern countries.¹¹⁷ Eventually, Hoekstra extended his generous behaviour towards the EU level, and announced at the beginning of April that the Netherlands would have a billion euros to put into the EU emergency support package.¹¹⁸ A few days later, the Eurogroup had agreed on the package deal.¹¹⁹ This behaviour reflects the overall party stance, as the 2017 CDA manifesto argued that the EU should focus on its core tasks, but should not forget the importance of the national governments and their policies.¹²⁰ Although Hoekstra might have looked like the villain on the European stage, he did reflect what was mentioned in the party’s manifesto. In their 2021 manifesto, they emphasise the importance of change to the European budget, the extension of new EU members and the unanimity of any decision-making processes.¹²¹

In contrast, the Minister of Social Affairs and Employment, Wouter Koolmees (D66), wanted a more open and collective response from the EU. Both the D66 manifestos of 2017 and 2021 emphasise the need for more collective action within the EU, as all nation-states are connected and need collective action, as the coronavirus does not end at the Dutch border.¹²² Within the cabinet, Koolmees reportedly argued against restrictive measures, as he was concerned for the social and economic toll the lockdown would take on the Dutch citizens.¹²³ Similarly, Minister of Economic Affairs Eric Wiebes (VVD) was concerned about restrictions leading to a bigger economic fallout. Together, Hoekstra, Koolmees and Wiebes questioned the limits suggested by Rutte, De Jonge and Grapperhaus, especially concerning the closure of schools and cultural institutions, as they were concerned for the high costs and the freedom of the Dutch citizens that were at stake.¹²⁴

¹¹⁷ NOS, “722 nieuwe coronapatiënten in ziekenhuis, 175 doden erbij in Nederland,” *NOS*, March 31, 2020,

<https://nos.nl/liveblog/2328879-722-nieuwe-coronapatiënten-in-ziekenhuis-175-doden-erbij-in-nederland>

¹¹⁸ NOS, “Hoekstra: een miljard Nederlands geld in coronafonds voor zwaar getroffen landen,” *NOS*, April 1, 2020, <https://nos.nl/artikel/2329111-hoekstra-een-miljard-nederlands-geld-in-coronafonds-voor-zwaar-getroffen-landen>

¹¹⁹ Bert van Slooten, “Dit zijn de winnaars en verliezers van het Europees akkoord,” *NOS*, April 10, 2020, <https://nos.nl/artikel/2330008-dit-zijn-de-winnaars-en-verliezers-van-het-europees-akkoord>

¹²⁰ CDA, “Keuzes voor een beter Nederland, Verkiezingsprogramma 2017-2021,” (2017): 34-35. <https://dnpprepo.ub.rug.nl/10871/1/CDAverkiezingsprogramma2017-2021.pdf>

¹²¹ CDA. “Nu doorpakken voor een sterke en eerlijke economie, een betrouwbare en dienstbare overheid, een veilige en verantwoordelijke samenleving, Verkiezingsprogramma 2021-2025.” (2021): 91, <https://dnpprepo.ub.rug.nl/13268/13/CDA%20verkiezingsprogramma%20TK%202021-2025.pdf>

¹²² D66. “D66 Verkiezingsprogramma 2017-2021.” (December 2016): 92

https://dnpprepo.ub.rug.nl/10864/1/D66_vp_TK2017_def.pdf; D66. “D66 concept-verkiezingsprogramma 2021-2025.” (September 2020): 116 <https://d66.nl/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/D66-concept-verkiezingsprogramma-2021-regelnummers.pdf>

¹²³ Thijs Broer, and Peter Kee. *Code Rood, het verhaal achter het corona-beleid*. (Uitgeverij Pluim, 2021), 87.

¹²⁴ Thijs Broer, and Peter Kee. *Code Rood, het verhaal achter het corona-beleid*. (Uitgeverij Pluim, 2021), 87.

Besides discussions and negotiations, there were also times when Ministers from the Rutte III cabinet faced public missteps that exposed the internal differences and undermined the cabinet's credibility. One of those incidents involved Minister of Justice and Security Ferdinand Grapperhaus, who was photographed breaking social distancing rules at his wedding.¹²⁵ This was right after the press conference on the 18th of August, after the summer break, when the virus infections increased again and restrictions to keep 1,5 meters distance from each other and the advice to not organise group gatherings for more than six people were back.¹²⁶ The image of both the Minister and cabinet Rutte III were put into question by the Dutch citizens as Grapperhaus was the one who initiated the fine of citizens for not following COVID-19 restriction orders.¹²⁷ After the incident, Prime Minister Rutte was expected to respond and remove the advice for social distancing as it did not seem to be necessary any longer.¹²⁸ Another incident involved Minister of the Interior and Kingdom Relations, Kajsa Ollongren (D66), who had written an article for the *Volkskrant* about the possibility of a temporary “coronawet” (corona law).¹²⁹ In light of the Dutch liberation day, which is celebrated each year on the 5th of May, she wrote about her concerns and the importance of freedom that was now taken away from the citizens due to the COVID-19 pandemic.¹³⁰ Together with the Minister of Justice and Security, Grapperhaus, they were working on a new temporary law as part of the crisis policy during the pandemic.¹³¹ However, the other ministers, especially De Jonge, were not notified of this article or the corona law that was in the making. This caused friction within the cabinet as De Jonge, Ollongren, and Grapperhaus later worked together on this law proposition, which received many critiques

¹²⁵ Wendelmoet Boersema, “‘Weddinggate’ levert Grapperhaus een forse deuk in zijn imago op,” *Trouw*, August 28, 2020,

<https://www.trouw.nl/politiek/weddinggate-levert-grapperhaus-een-forse-deuk-in-zijn-imago-op-b331470c/>

¹²⁶ “Augustus 2020: ‘Wij zijn klaar met het virus, maar het virus is not niet klaar met ons,’” Rijksoverheid, last modified August 31, 2020,

<https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/onderwerpen/coronavirus-tijdlijn/augustus-2020-wij-zijn-klaar-met-het-virus-maar-het-virus-is-nog-niet-klaar-met-ons>

¹²⁷ NOS, “Trouwfeest Grapperhaus: van ‘voorbeeldig’ tot ‘met de minuut ongeloofwaardiger,’” *NOS*, September 2, 2020,

<https://nos.nl/artikel/2346429-trouwfeest-grapperhaus-van-voorbeeldig-tot-met-de-minuut-ongeloofwaardiger>

¹²⁸ Wendelmoet Boersema, “‘Weddinggate’ levert Grapperhaus een forse deuk in zijn imago op,” *Trouw*, August 28, 2020,

<https://www.trouw.nl/politiek/weddinggate-levert-grapperhaus-een-forse-deuk-in-zijn-imago-op-b331470c/>

¹²⁹ Kajsa Ollongren, “Opinie: het afwegen van grondrechten toont aan dat we oneindig veel verder zijn dan 75 jaar geleden,” *Volkskrant*, May 4, 2020,

<https://www.volkskrant.nl/columns-opinie/opinie-het-afwegen-van-grondrechten-toont-aan-dat-we-oneindig-veel-verder-zijn-dan-75-jaar-geleden-b9b8e389/>

¹³⁰ Thijs Broer, and Peter Kee. *Code Rood, het verhaal achter het corona-beleid*. (Uitgeverij Pluim, 2021), 122.

¹³¹ Kajsa Ollongren, “Opinie: het afwegen van grondrechten toont aan dat we oneindig veel verder zijn dan 75 jaar geleden,” *Volkskrant*, May 4, 2020,

<https://www.volkskrant.nl/columns-opinie/opinie-het-afwegen-van-grondrechten-toont-aan-dat-we-oneindig-veel-verder-zijn-dan-75-jaar-geleden-b9b8e389/>

from other members of the cabinet.¹³² Eventually, after months of adjustments suggested by the cabinet and Tweede Kamer, the law was approved. Incidents like these highlight moments where individual ministers were out of line with the broader cabinet strategy, which reveals the challenges of maintaining this internal cohesion and consistent messaging during a rapidly evolving crisis. Missteps show how personal decisions could become friction and complications within coalition dynamics.

The ChristenUnie, on the other hand, was mainly in the background of the pandemic. While the party is traditionally more reserved about EU integration, the party acknowledged the need for European cooperation in areas that transcend national borders, such as pandemics.¹³³ The CU supported measures to protect vulnerable groups and recognised that international solidarity was morally and practically necessary.¹³⁴ Although less prominent in public health or finance portfolios, the CU's influence was visible in its calls for social cohesion, family support, and attention to mental health impacts during the crisis.

One last detail that was quite interesting about the crisis management of Rutte III was the fact that the liberal parties were determined to spend money during this crisis. After years of saving money, the liberal parties argue that an increasing national debt does not pose a problem for the Dutch economy.¹³⁵ As mentioned, this surprised the opposition parties, especially the leftist parties, such as the SP, who questioned whether the liberal right-wing parties were not turning left. Both Wiebes (VVD) and Koolmees (D66) responded by stating that their crisis response could be considered to be left for the occasion, but would not change the ideology of both liberal parties.¹³⁶

These coalition dynamics demonstrate that Dutch crisis policymaking during the pandemic was shaped by continuous negotiation and ideological balancing within the cabinet. While Prime Minister Rutte provided strong executive leadership, supported by the Minister of Health, Welfare and Sport De Jonge, the final response to the pandemic was never determined in isolation. It was the result of coordination and cooperation between the cabinet

¹³² Thijs Broer, and Peter Kee. *Code Rood, het verhaal achter het corona-beleid*. (Uitgeverij Pluim, 2021), 122.

¹³³ ChristenUnie, "Kiezen voor wat écht telt, Verkiezingsprogramma 2021-2025," 2021: 131, <https://dnpprepo.ub.rug.nl/86151/1/ChristenUnie%20conceptverkiezingsprogramma%20TK%202021.pdf>

¹³⁴ NOS, "CU wil dat alle prostituees van financiële hulp gebruik kunnen maken," *NOS*, April 1, 2020, <https://nos.nl/nieuwsuur/artikel/2329082-cu-wil-dat-alle-prostituees-van-financiele-hulp-gebruik-kunnen-maken>

¹³⁵ Thijs Broer, and Peter Kee. *Code Rood, het verhaal achter het corona-beleid*. (Uitgeverij Pluim, 2021), 29.

¹³⁶ NOS. "Als bedrijven redden en zorgen voor werk links is, dan ben ik nu even links." *NOS*, September 16, 2020. <https://nos.nl/nieuwsuur/artikel/2348479-als-bedrijven-redden-en-zorgen-voor-werk-links-is-dan-ben-ik-nu-even-links>

and scientific advice from the Outbreak Management Team (OMT).¹³⁷ Although the VVD and CDA generally prioritised fiscal caution and national responsibility, D66 called for civil liberties and stronger EU cooperation; on the other hand, the ChristenUnie highlighted solidarity and social well-being. Despite internal disagreements, such as tensions involving Ministers Hoekstra, Ollongren and Grapperhaus, the coalition is constantly aimed at presenting a unified alliance. These internal dynamics significantly influence the tone and substance of the Dutch government's crisis response.

The Results of Coalition Crisis Governance

The response of Rutte III mainly focused on responsibility and solidarity, where each coalition party emphasised a different dimension of the crisis. Ironically, the VVD 2017 manifesto had already predicted its approach to an EU-level crisis, stating that health policy is a national competence; however, when cross-border diseases enter the conversation, then the EU must cooperate.¹³⁸ Rutte points out the “intelligent lockdown” approach, which is citizen-driven, where the cabinet relies on the public trust and voluntary cooperation rather than coercion. This language reflects the VVD's focus on individual responsibility and economic continuity. D66, on the other hand, framed the pandemic as a moment to deepen European cooperation, calling for transparent and responsive EU-level coordination.¹³⁹ The CDA invoked a moral obligation to protect vulnerable populations, especially the youth and healthcare workers, through financial arguments aligning with their community values.¹⁴⁰ Likewise, the ChristenUnie raises the importance of social cohesion and shared responsibility, particularly across national borders.¹⁴¹

Even though the media reported the crisis as an extraordinary challenge, Rutte III presented a unified front. Despite the internal differences between the parties, their preferences shaped the tone and content of crisis management. Whereas the VVD might have been more on the forefront, due to their fraction leader as the Prime Minister, the smaller party within the

¹³⁷ Edo van der Goot, “Wie was de baas tijdens de coronacrisis? ‘Minister van VWS had de meeste invloed,’” *NU*, February 16, 2022.

<https://www.nu.nl/ovv-over-corona/6184527/wie-was-de-baas-tijdens-de-coronacrisis-minister-van-vws-had-meeste-invloed.html>

¹³⁸ VVD, “Zeker Nederland VVD verkiezingsprogramma 2017-2021.” (2017): 65,

https://www.vvd.nl/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/vvd_verkiezingsprogramma_pages.pdf

¹³⁹ D66, “D66 concept-verkiezingsprogramma 2021-2025,” (September 2020): 122,

<https://d66.nl/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/D66-concept-verkiezingsprogramma-2021-regelnummers.pdf>

¹⁴⁰ CDA, “Nu doorpakken voor een sterke en eerlijke economie, een betrouwbare en dienstbare overheid, een veilige en verantwoordelijke samenleving, Verkiezingsprogramma 2021-2025” (2021): 45,

<https://dnpprepo.ub.rug.nl/13268/13/CDA%20verkiezingsprogramma%20TK%202021-2025.pdf>

¹⁴¹ ChristenUnie, “Kiezen voor wat écht telt, Verkiezingsprogramma 2021-2025,” (2021): 131,

<https://dnpprepo.ub.rug.nl/86151/1/ChristenUnie%20conceptverkiezingsprogramma%20TK%202021.pdf>

coalition, the ChristenUnie, played a quieter and more consistent role. Although the alliance was able to work through the differences and missteps made by several ministers, the coalition fell in January 2021 over a crisis other than the pandemic.¹⁴² The Dutch response to the pandemic illustrates the challenges of coalition governance during an unexpected situation. Unlike later crises where geopolitical and security concerns were more dominant, the pandemic cut across all sectors of society, turning a health emergency into a socio-economic test.¹⁴³ Although the overall cabinet could project stability, the internal dynamics shaped every step of the way.

¹⁴² <https://nos.nl/collectie/13855/artikel/2364513-kabinet-rutte-iii-gevalen-wiebes-helemaal-weg>

¹⁴³ Lucia Quaglia, and Amy Verdun, “The COVID-19 pandemic and the European Union: politics, policies and institutions,” *Journal of European Public Policy* 30.4 (2023): 600; Arjen Boin, and Mark Rhinard, “Crisis management performance and the European Union: the case of COVID-19,” *Journal of European Public Policy*, 30.4 (2023): 665, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2022.2141304>

5. Research Chapter: the Ukraine crisis

On the 24th of February 2022, Russia invaded Ukraine, which marked a watershed moment in EU security policy.¹⁴⁴ While the conflict erupted in 2022, its origins trace back to the 2014 annexation of Crimea, which destabilised Eastern Ukraine and triggered violence in the Donbas region.¹⁴⁵ Since the Crimea annexation, Ukraine has increasingly aligned itself with the West by seeking closer ties with organisations such as the EU and NATO to reduce Russian influence in the country.¹⁴⁶ However, this Western orientation is strongly opposed by the Russians, who view Ukraine's alignment with the West as a direct threat to Russia's national security and geopolitical interests.¹⁴⁷ The primary motivation behind the 2022 invasion was the increased tension from Russia, which argued to protect the Russian-speaking population in Eastern Ukraine and to counter eastward NATO expansion.¹⁴⁸ However, these justifications were widely rejected by the European governments, who viewed the invasion as a pure act of aggression and a breach of international law.

For the EU specifically, the war posed a fundamental challenge to its role as a global actor, and it was forced to redefine its positions on defence, enlargement and external crisis management.¹⁴⁹ The Ukraine crisis prompted swift and collective coordination action from the Union. Besides the Union imposing multiple rounds of sanctions aimed at weakening the Russian economy and their military capabilities, the organisation also called for closer coordination with NATO and the United States.¹⁵⁰ A few weeks before the invasion, the organisations and agencies had already been informed about the possible invasion, which helped shape early EU crisis response management. After the invasion at the end of February,

¹⁴⁴ Veronica Anghel and Erik Jones, "Is Europe really forged through crisis? Pandemic EU and the Russia-Ukraine war," *Journal of European Public Policy* 30.4 (2023): 767; Maryna Rabinovych and Anne Pintsch, "Political conditionality as an EU foreign policy and crisis management tool. The case of EU wartime political conditionality vis-à-vis Ukraine," *Journal of European Integration* (2024): 2.

¹⁴⁵ Peterson K. Ozili. "Global economic consequences of Russian invasion of Ukraine." *Dealing with regional conflicts of global importance*, IGI Global (2024): 2.

¹⁴⁶ Peterson K. Ozili. "Global economic consequences of Russian invasion of Ukraine." *Dealing with regional conflicts of global importance*, IGI Global (2024): 2; Maryna Rabinovych and Anne Pintsch, "Political conditionality as an EU foreign policy and crisis management tool. The case of EU wartime political conditionality vis-à-vis Ukraine," *Journal of European Integration* (2024): 2.

¹⁴⁷ Peterson K. Ozili. "Global economic consequences of Russian invasion of Ukraine." *Dealing with regional conflicts of global importance*, IGI Global (2024): 11.

¹⁴⁸ Peterson K. Ozili. "Global economic consequences of Russian invasion of Ukraine." *Dealing with regional conflicts of global importance*, IGI Global (2024): 10.

¹⁴⁹ Veronica Anghel and Erik Jones, "Is Europe really forged through crisis? Pandemic EU and the Russia-Ukraine war," *Journal of European Public Policy* 30.4 (2023): 768.

¹⁵⁰ Veronica Anghel and Erik Jones, "Is Europe really forged through crisis? Pandemic EU and the Russia-Ukraine war," *Journal of European Public Policy* 30.4 (2023): 772.

the EU activated the European Peace Facility (EPF) to finance military aid to Ukraine.¹⁵¹ For the Netherlands, the war in Ukraine raised critical policy questions, mainly regarding military support, fiscal solidarity and the role of the EU in foreign and security affairs.¹⁵² The conflict tested the ability of the Dutch coalition government to form a cohesive response amidst diverging views on defence integration, European enlargement and sanction policies. Therefore, the Ukraine crisis offers a valuable case for examining how national political coalition dynamics shape a member state's response to an EU-led crisis. It also highlights how national preferences are constructed under conditions of geopolitical urgency within a coalition government.

EU Crisis Governance during the Ukraine Crisis

The EU's response to the Ukraine crisis revealed the strengths and the limitations of collective crisis governance under extreme geopolitical pressure within the institution. Especially after the COVID-19 pandemic, when the Union was not at its strongest,¹⁵³ that was still active at the time of the Russian invasion, the EU was able to react quickly and decisively.¹⁵⁴ Within days, the EU announced to put financial sanctions on Russia, coordinated humanitarian and military aid for Ukraine, and discussed the possibility of EU enlargement granting Ukraine EU membership.¹⁵⁵ Besides the economic sanctions, the EU also pressured energy technology, halted visa agreements, closed European spacecraft, and even removed Russia's participation from cultural and sports events.¹⁵⁶ These collective measures together aimed to weaken Russia's economic capacity to sustain its war; however, as observed by Sjørnsen and Rosén, these sanctions were not driven by strategic interest or institutional routines, but were based on the shared belief of defending Ukraine's sovereignty.¹⁵⁷ As the Dutch Prime Minister emphasised in March 2022, we in Europe are

¹⁵¹ Veronica Anghel and Erik Jones, "Is Europe really forged through crisis? Pandemic EU and the Russia-Ukraine war," *Journal of European Public Policy* 30.4 (2023): 775.

¹⁵² NOS. "Rutte: escalatie door Rusland in Oekraïne kan niet onbeantwoord blijven." NOS, February 22, 2022. <https://nos.nl/artikel/2418401-rutte-escalatie-door-rusland-in-oekraïne-kan-niet-onbeantwoord-blijven>

¹⁵³ Veronica Anghel and Erik Jones, "Is Europe really forged through crisis? Pandemic EU and the Russia-Ukraine war," *Journal of European Public Policy* 30.4 (2023): 781.

¹⁵⁴ Helene Sjørnsen and Guri Rosén, "Arguing sanctions. On the EU's response to the crisis in Ukraine," *JCMS: journal of common market studies* 55.1 (2017): 20. DOI: 10.1111/jcms.12443

¹⁵⁵ Veronica Anghel and Erik Jones, "Is Europe really forged through crisis? Pandemic EU and the Russia-Ukraine war," *Journal of European Public Policy* 30.4 (2023): 772.

¹⁵⁶ Peterson K. Ozili. "Global economic consequences of Russian invasion of Ukraine." *Dealing with regional conflicts of global importance*, IGI Global (2024): 12; "Verklaring van minister-president Mark Rutte in de Tweede Kamer over de oorlog in Oekraïne." Rijksoverheid, last modified February 22, 2022.

<https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/documenten/toespraken/2022/02/28/verklaring-van-minister-president-mark-rutte-in-de-tweede-kamer-over-de-oorlog-in-oekraïne>

¹⁵⁷ Helene Sjørnsen and Guri Rosén, "Arguing sanctions. On the EU's response to the crisis in Ukraine," *JCMS: journal of common market studies* 55.1 (2017): 22. DOI: 10.1111/jcms.12443

family, and the Ukrainians belong to that family.¹⁵⁸ Therefore, there is this notion of “we feeling” where the Europeans have a common purpose, which in this case is the protection of a sovereign state and its citizens.¹⁵⁹

The European Commission played the most visible role in the response to the crisis, including the President, Ursula von der Leyen, who emerged as a key figure in both diplomacy and public communication.¹⁶⁰ One of their responsibilities was the launch of the REPowerEU strategy in May 2022, which was a program aimed at diversifying energy sources in the EU and reducing their dependency on Russia.¹⁶¹ Over time, the unified response started to crumble as the unity began to disappear, as argued by Anghel and Jones, who thought of the EU response as more defensive instead of a strategic move.¹⁶² Although the initial collective action was intense, the response gradually shifted towards decentralisation.¹⁶³ This is where the perspective of LI comes in, as these developments exemplify how consensus among member states is necessary for EU action in crises. Critical decision-making processes such as sanctions, EU enlargement and security support resulted from international bargaining, meaning that national preferences were formed that did not bring consensus among the members. For example, members like Germany and the Netherlands, who are primarily dependent on Russia for their energy and economic trade, were initially more hesitant when negotiating on the possibility of sanctions.¹⁶⁴ On the other hand, countries like Sweden and the Baltic states are less reliant on Russia and therefore pushed more aggressively for support for sanctions.¹⁶⁵ However, in the end, all that was left was the feeling of solidarity towards the Ukrainian people, especially in humanitarian efforts and refugee reception, but less so in areas requiring painful national adjustments, such as

¹⁵⁸ Christof Schmidt, “5 - Te veel democratie, dus gebeurt er niets (Asiel en Migratie),” In *Dé EU bestaat niet, Hoe democratisch is de Europese politiek?* (Uitgeverij de Arbeiderspers, 2023): 147.

¹⁵⁹ Veronica Anghel and Erik Jones, “Is Europe really forged through crisis? Pandemic EU and the Russia-Ukraine war,” *Journal of European Public Policy* 30.4 (2023): 774.

¹⁶⁰ Veronica Anghel and Erik Jones, “Is Europe really forged through crisis? Pandemic EU and the Russia-Ukraine war,” *Journal of European Public Policy* 30.4 (2023): 772.

¹⁶¹ Veronica Anghel and Erik Jones, “Is Europe really forged through crisis? Pandemic EU and the Russia-Ukraine war,” *Journal of European Public Policy* 30.4 (2023): 776; “REPowerEU at a glance,” European Commission, accessed June 4, 2025. https://commission.europa.eu/topics/energy/repower_eu_en

¹⁶² Veronica Anghel and Erik Jones, “Is Europe really forged through crisis? Pandemic EU and the Russia-Ukraine war,” *Journal of European Public Policy* 30.4 (2023): 778.

¹⁶³ Veronica Anghel and Erik Jones, “Is Europe really forged through crisis? Pandemic EU and the Russia-Ukraine war,” *Journal of European Public Policy* 30.4 (2023): 773.

¹⁶⁴ Helene Sjursen and Guri Rosén, “Arguing sanctions. On the EU’s response to the crisis in Ukraine,” *JCMS: journal of common market studies* 55.1 (2017): 22. DOI: 10.1111/jcms.12443

¹⁶⁵ Helene Sjursen and Guri Rosén, “Arguing sanctions. On the EU’s response to the crisis in Ukraine,” *JCMS: journal of common market studies* 55.1 (2017): 20. DOI: 10.1111/jcms.12443

energy dependency.¹⁶⁶ As Anghel and Jones note, “solidarity is national first, to neighbours next, and only distantly European”.¹⁶⁷ Member states initially agreed to ban Russian coal imports and later oil, but the broader transition away from Russian fossil fuels exposed profound asymmetries in energy dependency.¹⁶⁸ The Netherlands, for example, faced significant pressure from the home front due to its reliance on Russian gas, which limited the power of the supranational organisation. This can be confirmed by the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) that remains intergovernmental by design, meaning that the EU and its institutions have limited authority to enforce decisions without the consent of all member states.¹⁶⁹ This crisis highlights the ongoing structural weakness in EU governance, where a shared sense of unity eventually remains limited, particularly when economic and political costs are unevenly distributed across the member states.¹⁷⁰

Although the EU has limited authority and power, the decision to grant candidate status to Ukraine amidst an ongoing war marked a historical shift, signalling a bold move into geopolitical competition and a firm commitment to supporting democratic transformation in the region.¹⁷¹ As Boin and Rhinard note, effective crisis management hinges on diagnosing problems, mobilising resources, and engaging the public, areas in which the European Commission responded swiftly and decisively, contrasting with its earlier hesitations during the pandemic.¹⁷² Yet, despite the strong and unified start, the EU’s response gradually exposed the familiar structural limitations. The Ukraine crisis tested the delicate balance between the EU’s supranational aspirations and its intergovernmental reality, highlighting the potential and the fragility of its evolving crisis governance framework. Within this context, examining how individual member states, such as the Netherlands, formulated and projected their positions is essential for understanding the broader dynamics of EU decision-making under pressure.

¹⁶⁶ Veronica Anghel and Erik Jones, “Is Europe really forged through crisis? Pandemic EU and the Russia-Ukraine war,” *Journal of European Public Policy* 30.4 (2023): 774.

¹⁶⁷ Veronica Anghel and Erik Jones, “Is Europe really forged through crisis? Pandemic EU and the Russia-Ukraine war,” *Journal of European Public Policy* 30.4 (2023): 774.

¹⁶⁸ “REPowerEU at a glance,” European Commission, accessed June 4, 2025.

https://commission.europa.eu/topics/energy/repowereu_en

¹⁶⁹ Helene Sjørnsen and Guri Rosén, “Arguing sanctions. On the EU’s response to the crisis in Ukraine,” *JCMS: journal of common market studies* 55.1 (2017): 22. DOI: 10.1111/jcms.12443

¹⁷⁰ Helene Sjørnsen and Guri Rosén, “Arguing sanctions. On the EU’s response to the crisis in Ukraine,” *JCMS: journal of common market studies* 55.1 (2017): 21. DOI: 10.1111/jcms.12443

¹⁷¹ Maryna Rabinovych and Anne Pintsch, “Political conditionality as an EU foreign policy and crisis management tool. The case of EU wartime political conditionality vis-à-vis Ukraine,” *Journal of European Integration* (2024): 2.

¹⁷² Veronica Anghel and Erik Jones, “Is Europe really forged through crisis? Pandemic EU and the Russia-Ukraine war,” *Journal of European Public Policy* 30.4 (2023): 772.

Dutch Governmental Response

On the 28th of February 2022, a few days after the Russian invasion, Prime Minister Mark Rutte made a statement in the Tweede Kamer, acknowledging the devastation of the Ukraine crisis.¹⁷³ He argued that Russian aggression would not be tolerated on democratic European grounds. The Netherlands is determined to sanction Russia and will help Ukraine with military aid.¹⁷⁴ Although the Netherlands was dependent on Russian fossil fuels, the government aligned itself firmly with the EU's collective response, supporting sanctions and the REPowerEU program.¹⁷⁵ But, as we know by now, EU authority needs consensus among the member states, as this crisis again reveals that in times of crisis, national governments are the most potent players.¹⁷⁶ Especially when debating what strategy a national government will use against a powerful geopolitical player like Russia. Despite the Dutch dependency on Russia's energy, Rutte IV did not want to finance Russia indirectly by purchasing Russian gas, coal and oil, which would eventually finance their war efforts.¹⁷⁷ Rutte emphasises our duty as Dutch and European citizens to provide aid to Ukraine, not only by providing military equipment, but also by welcoming Ukrainian refugees as they are part of the European family.¹⁷⁸ This shift in the Dutch political discourse concerning migration is what surprised many.

In contrast with the strong divisions during the 2015-2016 Refugee crisis, the Netherlands, along with the other EU member states, expressed broad solidarity to Ukrainian refugees, rapidly offering them protection under the EU's Temporary Protection Directive.¹⁷⁹ This shift in tone reflects a moral framing of the conflict as one between democracy and authoritarianism, as echoed in Minister Kaag's (D66) "Europeaspeech" in March 2022, 30

¹⁷³ "Verklaring van minister-president Mark Rutte in de Tweede Kamer over de oorlog in Oekraïne." Rijksoverheid, last modified February 22, 2022.

<https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/documenten/toespraken/2022/02/28/verklaring-van-minister-president-mark-rutte-in-de-tweede-kamer-over-de-oorlog-in-oekraïne>

¹⁷⁴ "Verklaring van minister-president Mark Rutte in de Tweede Kamer over de oorlog in Oekraïne." Rijksoverheid, last modified February 22, 2022.

<https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/documenten/toespraken/2022/02/28/verklaring-van-minister-president-mark-rutte-in-de-tweede-kamer-over-de-oorlog-in-oekraïne>

¹⁷⁵ NRC. "Rutte: ongekende agressie bedreigt Europese stabiliteit." *NRC Handelsblad*, February 22, 2022.

¹⁷⁶ Veronica Anghel and Erik Jones, "Is Europe really forged through crisis? Pandemic EU and the Russia-Ukraine war," *Journal of European Public Policy* 30.4 (2023): 780.

¹⁷⁷ Veronica Anghel and Erik Jones, "Is Europe really forged through crisis? Pandemic EU and the Russia-Ukraine war," *Journal of European Public Policy* 30.4 (2023): 775-776.

¹⁷⁸ Christof Schmidt, "5 - Te veel democratie, dus gebeurt er niets (Asiel en Migratie)," In *Dé EU bestaat niet, Hoe democratisch is de Europese politiek?* (Uitgeverij de Arbeiderspers, 2023): 147;

<https://nos.nl/artikel/2418401-rutte-escalatie-door-rusland-in-oekraïne-kan-niet-onbeantwoord-blijven>

¹⁷⁹ Christof Schmidt, "5 - Te veel democratie, dus gebeurt er niets (Asiel en Migratie)," In *Dé EU bestaat niet, Hoe democratisch is de Europese politiek?* (Uitgeverij de Arbeiderspers, 2023): 146.

years after signing the Treaty of Maastricht.¹⁸⁰ In her speech, Kaag addressed that the future of the Netherlands is European, linking national security and prosperity directly to European cooperation. Although the Union has had many failures and successes, the organisation is at a turning point since war and violence have returned on our continent.¹⁸¹ Minister Hoekstra (CDA), the Minister of Foreign Affairs in Cabinet Rutte IV, agreed by emphasising how war and violence have not been on this continent for decades, demanding we stand with our Ukrainian brothers.¹⁸² Eventually, Rutte IV supported Ukraine in 2022 by providing humanitarian aid through the Ukraine Humanitarian Fund of the UN, welcoming Ukrainian refugees in the Netherlands, military assistance through the NATO trust fund, and the reconstruction of Ukrainian cities.¹⁸³

Still, the Netherlands faced difficult trade-offs, particularly due to its energy dependency on Russia, which complicated the implementation of sanctions and the effect this would have on the Dutch economy. A month after the invasion, a press conference was held by Deputy Prime Minister Kaag (D66), who explained the cabinet's strategy to fight increasing energy prices in the Netherlands by lowering taxes on energy, diesel, and petrol. Two months later, Minister of Foreign Affairs Hoekstra (CDA) visited Zelensky, emphasising that the Netherlands will support Ukraine until the end. However, when Zelensky asked about the Dutch position on EU membership for Ukraine, the minister remained vague.¹⁸⁴ This supports the greater picture of how the EU's collective action started strong but weakened. The same goes for Cabinet Rutte IV, who were determined from the start of the crisis; however, eventually, the Dutch reliance on Russian energy highlighted the tension between normative commitments and economic realities.

¹⁸⁰ “Toespraak minister Kaag bij De toekomst van Nederland is Europees. 30 jaar na het Verdrag van Maastricht,” Rijksoverheid, last modified March 8, 2022, <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/onderwerpen/oorlog-in-oekraïne/documenten/toespraken/2022/03/08/europaspeech-minister-kaag-de-toekomst-van-nederland-is-europees.-dertig-jaar-na-het-verdrag-van-maastricht>

¹⁸¹ “Toespraak minister Kaag bij De toekomst van Nederland is Europees. 30 jaar na het Verdrag van Maastricht,” Rijksoverheid, last modified March 8, 2022, <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/onderwerpen/oorlog-in-oekraïne/documenten/toespraken/2022/03/08/europaspeech-minister-kaag-de-toekomst-van-nederland-is-europees.-dertig-jaar-na-het-verdrag-van-maastricht>

¹⁸² NOS. “Russische aanval op Oekraïne scherp veroordeeld: ‘Donkere dag voor Europa’.” *NOS*, February 24, 2022. <https://nos.nl/artikel/2418631-russische-aanval-op-oekraïne-scherp-veroordeeld-donkere-dag-voor-europa>; NRC. “Rutte: ongekende agressie bedreigt Europese stabiliteit.” *NRC Handelsblad*, February 22, 2022.

¹⁸³ “Nederlandse hulp voor Oekraïne.” Rijksoverheid, accessed June 4, 2025. <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/onderwerpen/oorlog-in-oekraïne/nederlandse-hulp-voor-oekraïne#anker-7-nederlandse-hulp-in-2022-van-dag-tot-dag>

¹⁸⁴ NOS. “Hoekstra belooft steunt aan Zelensky” *NOS*, May 10, 2022. <https://nos.nl/liveblog/2428160-hoekstra-belooft-steun-aan-zelensky-fins-advies-voor-toetreding-tot-navo>

Internal Dynamics within the Rutte IV Cabinet

Despite the success of the strong collective and coordinated response by both the EU and cabinet Rutte IV, this unification weakened progressively. In the initial stages of the Ukraine crisis, Prime Minister Mark Rutte (VVD), Minister of Finance Sigrid Kaag (D66), and Minister of Foreign Affairs Wopke Hoekstra (CDA) were mainly in the media spotlight. These figures were the public face of how the Dutch responded to the Russian invasion by delivering press conferences, speaking to the media, and visiting Ukraine. Although this crisis fell under a new government, cabinet Rutte IV, there was little to no trust in this coalition.¹⁸⁵ Especially in October 2021, after the announcement that Rutte IV would consist of the same four political parties as Rutte III, who had failed in their previous term due to the childcare benefits scandal that broke up the coalition.¹⁸⁶ However, the response of cabinet Rutte IV to the Ukraine crisis did reflect an unexpected, rare moment of unity on foreign policy despite the parties' differing ideological backgrounds.

Already before the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the Dutch coalition parties had articulated concerns in their 2017 manifestos about the growing geopolitical instability and the role of the Russians in this. The CDA, for example, emphasises the importance of strengthening bilateral and multilateral cooperation within institutions like the EU and NATO.¹⁸⁷ Their manifesto emphasises that global challenges like terrorism or the refugee crisis inevitably affect the Netherlands, marking international cooperation as essential. Similarly, D66 has strongly advocated for deeper European integration, explicitly addressing the threat of the annexation of Crimea and the Donbas conflict to the Dutch security.¹⁸⁸ Both the CDA and D66 frame European cooperation as the essential recipe to freedom, security and peace, as instability, terrorism, and chaos need to be prevented.¹⁸⁹ The ChristenUnie, additionally, raises the importance of investing more in the Ministry of Defence, complying

¹⁸⁵ Mark Lieveisse Adriaanse, "Hoe kan dezelfde regering nu opeens vernieuwend zijn?" *NRC Handelsblad*, October 1, 2021.

<https://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2021/10/01/hoe-kan-dezelfde-regering-nu-opeens-vernieuwend-zijn-a4060458>

¹⁸⁶ Mark Lieveisse Adriaanse, "Hoe kan dezelfde regering nu opeens vernieuwend zijn?" *NRC Handelsblad*, October 1, 2021.

<https://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2021/10/01/hoe-kan-dezelfde-regering-nu-opeens-vernieuwend-zijn-a4060458>

¹⁸⁷ CDA, "Keuzes voor een beter Nederland, Verkiezingsprogramma 2017-2021," (2017): 34.

<https://dnpprepo.ub.rug.nl/10871/1/CDaverkiezingsprogramma2017-2021.pdf>

¹⁸⁸ D66, "D66 Verkiezingsprogramma 2017-2021." (December 2016): 129,

https://dnpprepo.ub.rug.nl/10864/1/D66_vp_TK2017_def.pdf

¹⁸⁹ D66, "D66 Verkiezingsprogramma 2017-2021." (December 2016): 129

https://dnpprepo.ub.rug.nl/10864/1/D66_vp_TK2017_def.pdf; CDA, "Keuzes voor een beter Nederland,

Verkiezingsprogramma 2017-2021," (2017): 39,

<https://dnpprepo.ub.rug.nl/10871/1/CDaverkiezingsprogramma2017-2021.pdf>

with both CDA and D66 that prevention is of high necessity.¹⁹⁰ The only party that does not explicitly mention Ukraine or the annexation of Crimea in its 2017 manifesto is the VVD. Although they acknowledge Russia as a rising geopolitical actor, they explicitly say the possible threat this will bring to the Netherlands.¹⁹¹

However, the VVD's 2021 manifesto addressed more directly the growing security threat posed by Russia. The VVD emphasises the need for a strong and effective EU, primarily to safeguard Dutch security, specifically through coordinated action on migration, trade and geopolitical threats.¹⁹² However, the party did remain cautious about further EU integration as it argues that we need to be critical of the Union and its members.¹⁹³ The most surprising statement of this particular manifesto is the support for the use of sanctions “if Russia were to attack a neighbouring country again”.¹⁹⁴ Prime Minister Mark Rutte kept the parties' promise and strongly endorsed sanctions for Russia, as this war poses a direct threat to European security. As mentioned before, what was surprising was the change in dialogue concerning refugee waves, as state secretary of Asylum and Migration Eric van der Burg (VVD) warmly welcomed the Ukrainians into the Netherlands.¹⁹⁵

Despite ideological differences among the Dutch coalition parties, the Ukraine crisis fostered unity in political messaging and policy direction. The parties identified Russia as a common aggressor and framed the war as a direct threat to European security and democratic values. The VVD motivates the voter in the 2023 manifesto by presenting a historical connection to support Ukraine and fight for Dutch safety by linking the Russian invasion to the Dutch memories of occupation during the Second World War.¹⁹⁶ The VVD does not want to depend on the USA in terms of defence and security. Therefore, the party emphasises the importance

¹⁹⁰ ChristenUnie. “Hoopvol Realistisch, voorstellen voor een samenleving met toekomst, Verkiezingsprogramma 2017-2021.” (2017): 10, <https://insite.christenunie.nl/library/download/urn:uuid:b353eeb9-4a0d-4ad3-8835-05aeb4b4225a/verkiezingsprogramma+2017-2021+christenunie.pdf?redirected=1748611294>

¹⁹¹ VVD. “Zeker Nederland VVD verkiezingsprogramma 2017-2021.” (2017): 22, https://www.vvd.nl/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/vvd_verkiezingsprogramma_pages.pdf

¹⁹² VVD. “Samen aan de slag, Nieuwe keuzes voor een nieuwe tijd, Verkiezingsprogramma 2021-2025.” (2021): 46, <https://www.vvd.nl/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Verkiezingsprogramma-VVD-2021-2025.pdf>

¹⁹³ VVD. “Samen aan de slag, Nieuwe keuzes voor een nieuwe tijd, Verkiezingsprogramma 2021-2025.” (2021): 52, <https://www.vvd.nl/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Verkiezingsprogramma-VVD-2021-2025.pdf>

¹⁹⁴ VVD. “Samen aan de slag, Nieuwe keuzes voor een nieuwe tijd, Verkiezingsprogramma 2021-2025.” (2021): 50, <https://www.vvd.nl/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Verkiezingsprogramma-VVD-2021-2025.pdf>

¹⁹⁵ Christof Schmidt, “5 - Te veel democratie, dus gebeurt er niets (Asiel en Migratie),” In *Dé EU bestaat niet, Hoe democratisch is de Europese politiek?* (Uitgeverij de Arbeiderspers, 2023): 147.

¹⁹⁶ VVD. “Ruimte geven. Grenzen stellen.” (2023): 5, <https://www.vvd.nl/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/Verkiezingsprogramma-VVD-2023-2027-1.pdf>

of strengthening the Netherlands and the EU¹⁹⁷ The CDA and D66, together with the VVD all agree how the Dutch dependency on Russian fossil fuels have taken its toll, requiring the Netherlands to find alternative sources of coal, gas and oil, as dependency in Russia is posing a threat to the security and safety of this country.¹⁹⁸ CDA similarly warns against outsourcing Europe's security and economic sovereignty, labelling continued support for Ukraine as a moral obligation.¹⁹⁹ D66, on the other hand, is the only party that mentions a possible membership for Ukraine in their 2021 manifesto, although there are some adjustments that Ukraine needs to make, D66 is optimistic about their future membership.²⁰⁰ In addition, D66, just as ChristenUnie in 2017, mentions the increased investments that they want to make to the Ministry of Defence.²⁰¹ Even the ChristenUnie, typically more reserved in foreign affairs, remains a strong voice on the support for Ukraine through humanitarian aid and sanctions, naming Russia explicitly as "the aggressor".²⁰² Lastly, although the ChristenUnie does mention a possible membership for Ukraine, they seem more sceptical and less optimistic than D66, as they call out the fact that Ukraine should be fight corruption before it can enter the Union.²⁰³ These narratives show that while the coalition may have differed on other EU crises, the war in Ukraine produced a largely unified response anchored in shared principles of security, sovereignty, and solidarity. An identifiable external threat allowed for greater coherence and left little room for internal fragmentation.

Conclusion

During the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the Dutch coalition was marked more by unity than fragmentation. Across party manifestos and public discourse, the dominant political narrative

¹⁹⁷ VVD. "Ruimte geven. Grenzen stellen." (2023): 10,

<https://www.vvd.nl/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/Verkiezingsprogramma-VVD-2023-2027-1.pdf>

¹⁹⁸ VVD. "Ruimte geven. Grenzen stellen." (2023): 18,

<https://www.vvd.nl/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/Verkiezingsprogramma-VVD-2023-2027-1.pdf>; CDA. "Recht Doen, Een hoopvolle agenda voor heel Nederland." (2023): 81,

<https://d2vs36cx04qmpo.cloudfront.net/files/CDA-Verkiezingsprogramma-TK2023.pdf>; D66. "Nieuw Energie voor Nederland." (2023): 213,

<https://d66.nl/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/D66-Verkiezingsprogramma-2023-2027.pdf>

¹⁹⁹ CDA. "Recht Doen, Een hoopvolle agenda voor heel Nederland." 2023: 12,

<https://d2vs36cx04qmpo.cloudfront.net/files/CDA-Verkiezingsprogramma-TK2023.pdf>

²⁰⁰ D66, "D66 concept-verkiezingsprogramma 2021-2025," (September 2020): 199,

<https://d66.nl/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/D66-concept-verkiezingsprogramma-2021-regelnummers.pdf>; D66. "Nieuw Energie voor Nederland." (2023): 219,

<https://d66.nl/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/D66-Verkiezingsprogramma-2023-2027.pdf>

²⁰¹ ChristenUnie. "Hoopvol Realistisch, voorstellen voor een samenleving met toekomst, Verkiezingsprogramma 2017-2021." (2017): 103,

<https://insite.christenunie.nl/library/download/urn:uuid:b353eeb9-4a0d-4ad3-8835-05aeb4b4225a/verkiezingsprogramma+2017-2021+christenunie.pdf?redirected=1748611294>; D66. "Nieuw Energie voor Nederland." (2023): 214,

<https://d66.nl/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/D66-Verkiezingsprogramma-2023-2027.pdf>

²⁰² ChristenUnie. "Nieuwe Verbondenheid." (2023): 123, <https://www.christenunie.nl/nl/verkiezingsprogramm>

²⁰³ ChristenUnie. "Nieuwe Verbondenheid." (2023): 124, <https://www.christenunie.nl/nl/verkiezingsprogramm>

framed the crisis as a struggle between democratic values and authoritarian aggression. Metaphors of solidarity, moral obligation, and shared European identity were common, particularly in communications by the Rutte IV government. The VVD and the CDA highlighted security, national defence, and reducing dependency on authoritarian regimes such as Russia. On the other hand, the ChristenUnie emphasised moral responsibility and humanitarian support, which was supported by D66, who explicitly noted the importance of strong European advocacy.

Regarding influence and outcomes, the unity within the coalition meant that no single party dominated the government's stance, but preferences were emphasised. However, the Rutte IV coalition explicitly mentioned the importance of strengthening the Netherlands through the protection of freedom and security from the possible dangers of rising powers such as Russia.²⁰⁴ Even after the fall of the Rutte IV cabinet in July 2023, due to disagreements regarding asylum policy, it did not affect their unified commitment to supporting Ukraine. This suggests that the Ukraine crisis was an issue of rare alignment, where ideological differences were subordinated to a shared geopolitical imperative. As a case, the Ukraine crisis demonstrates how a shared external enemy can also unify a fragmented domestic coalition, offering a significant contrast.

²⁰⁴ “Coalitieakkoord. ‘Omzien naar elkaar, vooruitkijken naar de toekomst’.” Rijksoverheid, last modified January 10, 2022: 39, <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/documenten/publicaties/2022/01/10/coalitieakkoord-omzien-naar-elkaar-vooruitkijken-naar-de-toekomst>

6. Discussion & Conclusion

This thesis examined coalition dynamics within the Rutte III and IV governments that have shaped the Dutch response to the COVID-19 pandemic and the Ukraine crisis. Through a two-step analysis, first analysing individual party preferences and then tracing how those preferences are integrated within the coalition, this research demonstrates that national crisis responses are deeply contingent on internal political negotiations. This discussion integrates the key comparative findings of both crises and reflects on the broader implications of EU crisis governance and coalition politics.

Comparative analysis across crises

A central finding is that the nature of the crisis is strongly influenced by the degree of internal political alignment. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the coalition dynamics were marked by tension, improvisation, and negotiation.²⁰⁵ The four parties diverged on key issues like the health measures during the lockdowns, the freedom of citizens that was taken away, and the balance between economic protection and public safety. The crisis was led mainly by Prime Minister Rutte and Minister de Jonge, who led the response with executive authority, where internal debates surfaced both publicly and within cabinet meetings.²⁰⁶ This crisis exposed ideological differences between the parties, where the VVD prioritised the economy and D66 emphasised European cooperation and citizens' freedoms. In the end, the coalition formed a unified front, but this was not without behind-the-scenes negotiations and compromises.

In contrast, the Ukraine crisis revealed a quick and decisive response from both the EU and the Dutch government.²⁰⁷ The Russian invasion was argued to be an aggressive one, which was not only considered a geopolitical threat, but also brought historical memories.²⁰⁸ The four parties rallied around a shared condemnation of Russian aggression and supported military aid, sanctions against Russia, and humanitarian aid.²⁰⁹ This unanimity was reflected in public speeches, party manifestos and media outlets. The framing of the war was considered an attack on European values and led to a discursive unity that we have rarely

²⁰⁵ Thijs Broer, and Peter Kee. *Code Rood, het verhaal achter het corona-beleid*. (Uitgeverij Pluim, 2021), 79.

²⁰⁶ Thijs Broer, and Peter Kee. *Code Rood, het verhaal achter het corona-beleid*. (Uitgeverij Pluim, 2021), 87.

²⁰⁷ Helene Sjurson and Guri Rosén, "Arguing sanctions. On the EU's response to the crisis in Ukraine," *JCMS: journal of common market studies* 55.1 (2017): 20. DOI: 10.1111/jcms.12443

²⁰⁸ VVD. "Ruimte geven. Grenzen stellen." (2023): 5,

<https://www.vvd.nl/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/Verkiezingsprogramma-VVD-2023-2027-1.pdf>

²⁰⁹ "Verklaring van minister-president Mark Rutte in de Tweede Kamer over de oorlog in Oekraïne."

Rijksoverheid, last modified February 22, 2022.

<https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/documenten/toespraken/2022/02/28/verklaring-van-minister-president-mark-rutte-in-de-tweede-kamer-over-de-oorlog-in-oekraïne>

seen in other policy domains. Most notably, D66 was the only party to explicitly support Ukraine's membership in the EU in its manifesto, and no significant friction emerged within the coalition concerning this EU enlargement, which suggests that the emotional and normative framing of the conflict overrode ideological differences.²¹⁰

Framing and Public Narratives

There were also noticeable differences between the two crises. During the pandemic, the government relied heavily on behavioural framing where narratives such as the “intelligent lockdown” and “individual responsibility” were familiar.²¹¹ However, although these were broadly accepted initially, growing public frustration and parties clashing occurred over time concerning topics such as the lockdown measures and the coronalaw. The narrative of this shared responsibility eventually gave way to confusion, frustration, and critique due to missteps made by the Rutte III cabinet, such as the Grapperhaus wedding.²¹²

During the Ukraine invasion, the language was far more emotionally charged and morally grounded. The dominant narratives involved freedom, solidarity, and resistance through sanctions. Prime Minister Rutte, for example, compared the Russian invasion to the Dutch Second World War occupation, invoking a shared European history.²¹³ The VVD and CDA pushed for military support and energy independence, while D66 framed the crisis through European unity and democratic values. The ChristenUnie added moral urgency through frequently referencing peace and dignity.²¹⁴ Overall, the Ukraine crisis was not a distant conflict, but hit the EU and the Netherlands closer to home, considering Ukraine as a European family member.²¹⁵

²¹⁰ D66, “D66 concept-verkiezingsprogramma 2021-2025,” (September 2020): 199, <https://d66.nl/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/D66-concept-verkiezingsprogramma-2021-regelnummers.pdf>; D66, “Nieuw Energie voor Nederland.” (2023): 219, <https://d66.nl/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/D66-Verkiezingsprogramma-2023-2027.pdf>

²¹¹ Merel van Hulsen, Kirsten Rohde, and Job van Exel, “Het Nederlandse coronabeleid als sociaal dilemma,” *VGE Bulletin* 37.2 (2020): 17.

²¹² Wendelmoet Boersema, “‘Weddinggate’ levert Grapperhaus een forse deuk in zijn imago op,” *Trouw*, August 28, 2020, <https://www.trouw.nl/politiek/weddinggate-levert-grapperhaus-een-forse-deuk-in-zijn-imago-op-b331470c/>

²¹³ VVD. “Ruimte geven. Grenzen stellen.” (2023): 5, <https://www.vvd.nl/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/Verkiezingsprogramma-VVD-2023-2027-1.pdf>

²¹⁴ ChristenUnie. “Hoopvol Realistisch, voorstellen voor een samenleving met toekomst, Verkiezingsprogramma 2017-2021.” (2017): 10, <https://insite.christenunie.nl/library/download/urn:uuid:b353eeb9-4a0d-4ad3-8835-05aeb4b4225a/verkiezingsprogramma+2017-2021+christenunie.pdf?redirected=1748611294>

²¹⁵ Christof Schmidt, “5 - Te veel democratie, dus gebeurt er niets (Asiel en Migratie),” In *Dé EU bestaat niet, Hoe democratisch is de Europese politiek?* (Uitgeverij de Arbeiderspers, 2023): 147; <https://nos.nl/artikel/2418401-rutte-escalatie-door-rusland-in-oekraïne-kan-niet-onbeantwoord-blijven>

Intra-coalition Influence and Negotiation

Although the coalitions remained institutionally stable during both crises, internal influence varied. During the pandemic, party influence followed policy lines where D66 and ChristenUnie focused on health and social support measures, VVD's biggest concern was the economy, and CDA pushed for fiscal responsibility. The disagreements between the ministers, such as the tensions between Hoekstra, Koolmees, Rutte and De Jonge, highlighted the moments of friction that needed to be managed to maintain unity. During the Ukraine war, these lines blurred as parties converged around a shared enemy and a common goal. Whereas the VVD underlined security and the cooperation with NATO, D66 promoted deeper EU enlargement, and the ChristenUnie offered moral framing that aligned with public sentiment. Only Ukraine's membership in the EU was a point of discussion where D66 gave the only optimistic response to it,²¹⁶ while the other parties remained vague or silent.²¹⁷

Reflection on Dutch Coalition Governance

The Dutch case illustrates that multi-party coalitions do not inevitably lead to policy paralysis. When the stakes are perceived as existential or moral, as in the case of the Ukraine crisis, they act decisively and coherently. However, when crisis response requires balancing long-term institutional capacity with short-term trade-offs, as in the pandemic, coalition dynamics become more complex, fragmented and slow-moving. This comparison also reveals that coalition dynamics remain a central site of political negotiation, even during crises. The Rutte III and IV cabinets demonstrate considerable resilience, but also experienced stress, culminating in the cabinet's fall in July 2023, triggered by disagreement over asylum policy, not over the Ukraine crisis. The fact that the Ukraine crisis did not produce significant political rifts underlines the unique cohesion it generated, something that cannot be assumed in other types of crisis.

Conclusion

To conclude, this thesis contributes to EU studies by bringing coalition politics into the foreground of crisis governance analysis. It shows that responses to crises are not simply about the national interests, but about which parties are in government and how they frame

²¹⁶ D66, "D66 concept-verkiezingsprogramma 2021-2025," (September 2020): 199, <https://d66.nl/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/D66-concept-verkiezingsprogramma-2021-regelnummers.pdf>; D66, "Nieuw Energie voor Nederland." (2023): 219, <https://d66.nl/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/D66-Verkiezingsprogramma-2023-2027.pdf>

²¹⁷ NOS. "Hoekstra belooft steunt aan Zelensky" NOS, May 10, 2022. <https://nos.nl/liveblog/2428160-hoekstra-belooft-steun-aan-zelensky-fins-advies-voor-toetreding-tot-navo>

and negotiate during a crisis. However, this study acknowledges limitations as a lack of interview data constrains insights into the behind-the-scenes dynamics. Future research could build on this by incorporating elite interviews or expanding the framework to compare more member states with different coalition structures. Moreover, future research could look into more crises, as this thesis was limited to analysing only the Migration or Energy crises.

The research question stated: *How do the political dynamics within the Dutch coalition government shape the country's response to EU crisis management during key regional crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the Ukraine crisis?* This thesis finds that national coalition dynamics significantly influence how the Netherlands responds to EU-led crises. While the COVID-19 pandemic and the Ukraine crisis demanded rapid and coordinated action, they differed in internal dynamics. Whereas the former revealed fragmentation and negotiation under uncertainty, the latter generated unity through moral framing and external threat perception. Understanding these differences is key to understanding Dutch foreign policy and the broader functioning of EU crisis management. As future crises emerge, the EU's collaboration capacity will depend as much on internal national politics as supranational coordination mechanisms. This thesis offers a foundation for exploring the domestic-EU nexus in further detail. The analysis shows that coalition dynamics are decisive in shaping the tone and substance of Dutch responses to EU-led crisis measures. During the COVID-19 pandemic, internal disagreements and ideological differences led to a more fragmented, negotiated response. In contrast, the Ukraine crisis fostered a high degree of alignment among coalition parties, resulting in a faster, more coherent stance. Thus, the Dutch government's position at the EU level cannot be understood without accounting for the interplay of party preferences, power balances, and framing strategies within the coalition.

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