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Informal Coalitions and Leadership in the European Union's Foreign Policy - Making Foreign Policy through Informal Governance

Abstract

Informal coalitions are a regular tool of Member States (MS) of the European Union (EU) to overcome the rigid formal decision-making structure in its Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP). In some cases, these informal coalitions act *in the name of the EU but outside the formal CFSP process*. Functional explanations, dominant in the literature, cannot sufficiently explain who leads these coalitions and why other MS accept this leadership. The article, therefore, tests the theoretical predictions of distributive-bargaining and sociological institutionalism in two central processes of EU foreign policymaking: the non-proliferation negotiations with Iran and the resolution of the Ukraine crisis. The article finds that distributive-bargaining institutionalism cannot be disregarded in the explanation *by who* these groups are created, but that sociological institutionalism can better explain MS behaviour *after* an informal leadership group has been set up and the acceptance of informal coalitions by other MS, which supports a more supranational reading of the CFSP.

Keywords: Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), informal governance, CFSP leadership

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Introduction

When the leaders of France, Germany, Russia and Ukraine met in the Normandy Format in Paris on December 9th, 2019, it was not only their countries' respective flags waving in the background. Also hanging there was that of the European Union (EU). This is surprising, given that the EU is not a party to the talks. In this symbolic way, France and Germany participate in the name of the EU, even though their participation in the Normandy Format is not integrated into the formal structures of the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP).

Even though such informal coalitions frequently arise in the EU's CFSP, our theoretical understanding of them is limited. The literature on informal coalitions has rightly identified functional explanations as a crucial contributing factor to the emergence of informal coalitions. The rigid formal structure of the CFSP decision-making process creates what has variously been described as a "leadership paradox" (Aggestam and Johansson 2017) or a "leadership dilemma" (Hill 2010), as leadership remains highly fragmented and diffuse in all steps of the policy cycle.

In agenda-setting, both the Commission and Member States (MS) have a right of initiative. Policy formulation tends towards no or lowest-common-denominator decisions as the intergovernmental structure of CFSP decision-making grants each MS a veto. Implementation is also shared by the EU and MS, with the EU often relying on MS' capacities and capabilities. External representation is the responsibility of several EU officials – the High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (HR/VP [Vice-President of the Commission]), but also the Presidents of the Commission and the European Council (recently exemplified by #sofagate), while MS also maintain their representatives and diplomatic structures.

To formulate and implement foreign policy in this rigid formal structure, MS often opt for informal coalitions for sharing information, voting, and lobbying together. In some cases, as with France's and Germany's seats at the Normandy Format table, these coalitions operate *outside of the formal constraints* of the CFSP decision-making process in the Council of the European Union (hereinafter the Council). Such cases are theoretically challenging, and functional explanations alone cannot sufficiently explain *how the composition and effectiveness of informal leadership groups* develop. Why would these MS be part of the coalition? Why would the other MS accept to lose their say in the formulation, and potential veto against the adoption, of policy in highly sovereignty-related foreign policy (Chapter 2)?

To address this research gap, this paper contrasts the explanatory value of rationalist and sociological institutionalist theory for the intra-EU dynamics at play in such instances of policy effectuation through informal leadership. Power-based rationalist institutionalism understands the move towards informal governance as an expression of the relative power of MS. Those MS outside the leadership coalition accept the dominance of the most powerful MS in exchange for their relatively larger-than-size power (the veto) under formal conditions. Sociological explanations emphasise the intersubjective process of role formation by which those MS in the informal coalition

continuously make their leadership legitimate by "doing a good job", demonstrating commitment and capability, and respecting (and negotiating) red lines of other MS (Chapter 3).

Two CFSP cases are then subjected to this analysis, the non-proliferation negotiations with Iran and the EU response to the Ukraine crisis. These cases are chosen for their high political and economic salience, which means that (almost) all MS have strong national interests, which makes their acceptance of an informal leadership coalition particularly challenging. The paper finds that while relative power was an important factor in the composition of the informal coalition – France, Germany, and the UK; and France and Germany, respectively. After the informal leadership group is incepted, however, a continuous process of leadership role formation develops, other MS request to be more involved, channels of communication are created, commitment is displayed actively, leadership is legitimised (Chapter 4).

The paper concludes that while power-based explanation cannot be fully disregarded when explaining who assumes policy leadership in self-selected groups, the coalitions relate to other MS much in the way sociological institutionalism would predict. This lends credibility to a more supranational reading of the CFSP but also invites further research into the interplay of material and ideational factors on leadership formation in the EU's foreign policy (Chapter 5).

Informal Leadership Coalitions in the Common Foreign and Security Policy

Informal coalitions in CFSP

The CFSP policymaking process consists of a "multitude of actors with diverging interests and instruments in specific foreign policy dossiers" (Justaert and Keukeleire 2012, 444). To navigate complicated negotiations, coalition building is one of the central tactics MS employ (next to lobbying or mediating through good office, for instance) (Grøn and Wivel 2011; Nasra 2011). In these informal networks, MS cooperate by sharing information, expertise, voting jointly, and coordinating their lobbying efforts towards other MS.

In this sense, informal coalition-building is a constant feature of the CFSP process. The Benelux or the Baltic countries (Vilpišauskas 2011; Vilson 2015) as well as the Visegrad group (Dangerfield 2012; Marton 2012; Vilson 2015) regularly coordinate their positions to amplify their influence on CFSP outcomes. Similarly, groups of "like-minded countries", informal coalitions of states who seek to change a certain policy – employ informal coalition-building as a tactic within the formal CFSP decision-making framework. This has been the case with the coalition led by the Nordic countries to advance the inclusion of gender into EU development policy (Elgström 2017) or to enhance the civilian capabilities within the CFSP (Jakobsen 2009). These informal

coalitions, however, operate within the formal CFSP decision-making process and do not assume leadership of the EU's foreign policy process.

Informal leadership coalitions

An informal coalition becomes an informal *leadership* group when it "no longer put[s] [its] services at the disposal of the Council" but at the same time determines European policy (Delreux and Keukeleire 2017, 1481). As they go beyond the formal process, their starting point is not through a delegation by a vote of the Council, but the result of a process of self-selection into the group of those that possess "particular interests, expertise or capability" (Delreux and Keukeleire 2017, 1480). They also have an open and potentially evolving participation – if another actor invests political capital into participating in the group – and they focus on a specific policy issue (Delreux and Keukeleire 2017).

One can, therefore, define informal leadership groups as a *self-selected group of MS that decides on European foreign policy (exercises leadership) outside of the formal CSSP process on a specific policy issue*. They become *effective* when their leadership is accepted by the other MS, and their informal leadership receives formal consent. Effectiveness is thus understood here not as productivity or policy success but rather as the successful assumption of CFSP leadership of an informal coalition. Such cases are well-suited for the present analysis for two reasons. On the one hand, the informal leadership processes that are constantly in play in CFSP negotiations are difficult to observe without being present at the negotiations themselves but become visible when they materialise outside the negotiations (Delreux and Van den Brande 2010). On the other hand, the relationship between MS is particularly challenging to explain in cases where some give up their institutional prerogatives in favour of others.

While leadership through such self-selected groups is an important phenomenon in the CFSP, it has "largely escaped the radar of EU foreign policy scholars" (Delreux and Keukeleire 2017, 1471). The research agenda of Delreux, Keukeleire, and Justaert is a marked exception to that rule. Their work on the Contact Groups on Somalia and the Democratic Republic of the Congo highlights the functional benefits of these constellations, as they allow the EU to act in a field where otherwise it might not have taken action (Keukeleire 2007, Justaert and Keukeleire 2012).

This positive functional evaluation is shared by other authors (Everts 2001), which suggest to "embrace the trend towards ad hoc coalitions" (Puglerin 2019, 13). The Council itself has recognised that "[v]ariable actions and formats [by various groups of MS] can only strengthen the EU's global role [...]" (General Secretariat of the Council, cited in Bassiri Tabrizi 2018, 68). While some also warn against the potentially corroborative effects informal coalitions can have on a meaningful CFSP, as MS pick-and-choose when to work through the EU framework and when not to (Lehne 2017), the analysis generally rests on functional explanations and arguments.

While these accounts rightly stress the importance of functional explanations in the development, functional explanations alone cannot explain why other MS would accept such informal leadership coalitions. Even in the "core groups" analysed by Delreux et al., where other MS demonstrated limited commitment to the policy issues at hand, they tried to get a seat at the table (Keukeleire 2007). Why would other MS allow informal coalitions to overcome the functional difficulties at their expense?

Why would those MS outside the coalition forego their formal right to veto any policies that infringe on their national interest? A better theoretical understanding of these processes also interlinks with the discussion on the intergovernmental vs supranational character of CFSP. A power-based approach, which sees informality as a way for the powerful MS to "get their way", would indicate a stronger intergovernmental character for the CFSP. Sociological theories, which emphasise mutually constitutive processes of leadership role formation, would lend credibility to a more supranational characterisation of the CFSP. The next section, therefore, presents these two respective theories and presents the case selection.

Theory

When analysing informal leadership coalition, MS can be divided along a central line: those within the coalition and those outside of it. This applies equally to the European institutions – they may be involved in an informal leadership group, or they may not be included at all. On what basis does the self-selection process of a leadership coalition take place? And, for those outside the group: Why do other MS accept this leadership, even though they lose their formal prerogatives to influence policy outcomes? The answers suggested by rational-choice and sociological theories vary significantly.

Rational-choice institutionalist theory understands MS as utility-maximising rational actors for which formal rules are always incomplete and can be adjusted if required by the circumstances (Aggestam and Johansson 2017; Gegout 2010). One form of rational-choice institutionalism is functional institutionalism, which describes informality as a functional necessity to overcome cooperation problems (Reh et al. 2013). A functional explanation may well explain *why* informal coalitions may arise under the institutional structure of CFSP when only a few MS are interested in a specific foreign policy matter – then these MS cooperate informally to solve the cooperation problem. It has difficulty accounting for informal leadership coalitions on policy issues where most or all MS have strong interests – other MS would hardly accept their interests side-lined as a solution to the cooperation problem.

A more insightful rational institutionalist theory for the present analysis may be distributive bargaining theory, which emphasises the role of power as a driver of informality. Stressing that going informal generally benefits the more powerful actors, it describes the balance between formal and informal arrangements as a result of the disagreement between States and their relative power position to one another (Roger 2020). The smaller States accept that the larger State(s) circumvent the formal process

on some occasions in return for their stronger relative weight in the formal setting (Kleine 2014; Stone 2011).

Applied to informal leadership coalitions, the theory would suggest that it is the powerful states who assume leadership at the expense of other MS and the EU institutions. Other MS accept the leadership as part of a larger bargain – they enjoy relatively more formal power in unanimity voting at normal times, which provides a payoff for accepting leadership by the powerful states in extraordinary circumstances. Such a bargain, however, would not necessarily apply to the EU institutions. One should expect the EU institutions to have a strong preference for formal CFSP processes or to try to be a member of the informal coalition and avoid being side-lined.

Sociological theories, on the other hand, emphasise the importance of norms and expectations to determine the actions of individual states. Sociological institutionalism argues that the choice repertoire of agents is determined by mutual and co-constitutive socialisation processes which accord certain roles and identities to individual actors, thereby determining the range of behaviour that is available to them (Adler-Nissen 2014). Through repeated interaction with and within the European institutions, it becomes appropriate for certain MS to assume a leadership role in a specific policy issue (Reh et al. 2013).

The composition and existence of a leadership group would then result from an intersubjective process of role formation – which would be continuously ongoing throughout the policymaking process –, where those MS that demonstrate their ability on the policy issue are allowed to take up leadership to influence and guide the policy outcome. In other words, through capabilities, commitment, demonstration of good office, and justified interest, MS' leadership is *legitimised* (Aggestam and Johansson 2017). Through the same process of role formation, the EU institutions may also be involved if they are perceived as legitimate by the other MS.

Other MS accept this leadership role because of the legitimate prevalence of the MS in the leadership coalition, but also because they recognise that the leading States behave in the appropriate manner that takes into account the red lines and broad policy interests of the other MS. These processes would be observable in the arguments between the leading and non-leading MS, and the base upon which these arguments are made.

Operationalisation

Distributive bargaining and sociological institutionalism predict significantly different behaviour when it comes to informal leadership coalitions in CFSP, both for the composition of the coalition and the observable behaviour between the coalition and other MS. Distributive bargaining institutionalism interprets informality as a way for powerful MS to circumvent formal procedures in extraordinary times. As such, one would expect the most powerful MS (particularly France, Germany, and the UK, which

are significantly larger than other MS) to be present in the informal coalitions. Through a sociological lens, participation would not be determined by capability but by leadership credibility, demonstrated through good office and commitment. The (evolving) participation in the informal coalitions can be readily observed.

The other MS would, according to distributive bargaining theory, accept the leadership by the powerful MS in exchange for their relative weight in formal times. In so far, they would accept the powerful MS's speaking for the EU out of necessity and be motivated to comply by reference to their relative lack of power and capability. The sociological lens would predict a more dynamic process in which the leadership position is negotiated. Here, other MS would more likely demand participation and involvement, and they would be motivated to comply by demonstration of balanced positions, being taken into account, and commitment by the leading MS. These dynamics are also observable in positions taken and reasons given by the respective governments, often documented by secondary sources, as well as in the first-hand reports and primary sources from EU officials (Cronberg 2017; Middelaar 2019).

Case selection

These manifestations are most likely to be observable (and the most interesting, theoretically) in those cases in which all MS have a strong interest and where, therefore, functional explanations have the least explanatory value. In such cases, a functional institutionalist reduction of seats at the table is not an option. While the precise criteria of such issues are hard to define, two of the central CFSP issues of the last twenty years were and are effected through informal leadership coalitions: the EU-Iran negotiations and the Franco-German presence in the Normandy talks with Russia and Ukraine. In either case, the relative size (in (geo)political and economic terms) means that (almost) all MS have an interest in participating in the formulation of policy. As such, the development of informal leadership coalitions in these cases is particularly challenging to explain.

Additionally, these cases allow for a good evaluation of the success of an informal leadership coalition. In both cases, the policy pursued by the leading MS included EU sanctions on Iran and Russia, respectively. Sanctions re-arm other MS with a potential veto, as decisions on sanctions need to be taken unanimously. This potentially allows non-leading MS to block the policy of the informal coalition. Successfully pursuing joint EU sanctions provides a litmus test for the informal leadership coalition, demonstrating the effectiveness of leadership (in determining joint policy in the name of the EU). These cases are therefore selected for the analysis.

Before presenting said case analysis, a caveat with regards to the timeframe of the selected cases is in order. The Iran negotiations started in 2003 and ended with the signing of the JCPOA in 2015. The Ukraine crisis erupted in 2014, and the Normandy Format is ongoing. The institutional framework has changed over this time – the Lisbon Treaty introduced the EU's own external action service, there have been enlargements

in 2004, 2007, and 2013. This may create difficulty for the comparability of the two cases over such a wide timespan. Such concerns cannot fully be remedied. However, the general intergovernmental nature of CFSP remained under the Lisbon Treaty, and both examples take mostly place after the largest of the enlargements in 2004. Tendentially, enlargement would make formal decision-making under unanimity more inefficient, therefore favouring the behaviour this paper seeks to observe.

Case analyses

EU-Iran negotiations (2003-2015)

The initiative to take up negotiations with Iran was a direct response to the Iranian nuclear infrastructure becoming public knowledge, and the initiative was taken by the Foreign Ministries of Germany, the UK, and France, without consulting or even notifying the European institutions or other MS (Sauer 2019). Shortly after, however, they were joined in the Iran negotiations by the High Representative (HR/VP). Even after failed talks with Iran and the transfer of the Iran nuclear issue to the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), all four parties remained centrally involved in the E3/EU+3 format (also called P5+1 for consisting of five permanent members of the Security Council plus Germany – and the HR/VP). While it was later the bilateral negotiations between the US and Iran that ensured a deal was reached, the European initiative was important to the successful passage of the *Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action*.

With its intergovernmental nature, the initiative of the Foreign Ministers of France, Germany, and the UK corresponds closely to the predictions of distributive-bargaining rational institutionalism. The "E3" (the three largest EU MS) took leadership in extraordinary times: One central consideration for the "big three" had been their previous split with regards to the U.S.-American war in Iraq. They wanted to show European unity and to demonstrate that they, indeed, were capable of pursuing a joint European policy (Bergenäs 2010; Cronberg 2017). They thus clearly represent a self-selected leadership group, and relative power and capability was a clear selection criterion. They wanted to demonstrate European unity in a policy field in which their interests strongly converged, such as is nuclear non-proliferation (Adebahr 2017).

Significantly, they sought to demonstrate European unity without notifying the other MS first. The E3 expected the other MS to accept it and follow suit: The French foreign minister called the start of the negotiations an "important day for Europe" (Bergenäs 2010, 504). The other MS, caught by surprise by the trilateral visit to Tehran in early October, brought the issue to the front in the Council meeting on October 21st 2003 – a first indication that other MS would not simply acquiesce vis-à-vis the coalition of powerful MS, as distributive bargaining theory would predict. Nonetheless, the French representative clarified that while a European initiative, France, the UK, and Germany were not acting on behalf of the Union and that requirements of confidentiality and

urgency would not allow another approach – focusing on the functional benefits informal cooperation provides (Pouponneau 2013).

Ultimately, these arguments were insufficient to get a blank check from other MS. At the December 2003 Council meeting, other MS and Italy, Spain, and the Netherlands, in particular, questioned whether the E3 should speak in the name of the EU and demanded to be better informed about the negotiations (Adebahr 2017; Hill 2010). This open contestation, again, is much more in line with sociological predictions. The demand for transparency about the negotiations then represents the formulation of conditions for the acceptance of the leadership role of the E3.

The compromise that was reached then also represented a rearrangement of the leadership coalition – and an increase in transparency vis-à-vis the other MS – when the Council officially asked HR/VP Javier Solana to accompany the missions of the big MS (Pouponneau 2013). While Solana served as an important link of information to other MS, his original role was limited. As a French negotiator put it, the three MS coordinated among them and left the HR/VP "no margin of manoeuvre" as Solana was "happy to listen" (Pouponneau 2013, 129, authors' translation).

The E3 now officially negotiated on the EU's behalf, offering, for instance, the resumption of the EU-Iran Comprehensive Dialogue, which had been stalled in 2002 (Cronberg 2017). While the participation of the HR/VP may have been symbolical in the beginning, his role grew more relevant over time. Solana served the crucial role to inform the other MS about the progress of the negotiations, also providing legitimacy to the E3 initiative in this regard (Bergenäs 2010; Cronberg 2017). The fact that increased transparency significantly increased the legitimacy of the E3 coalition is strongly indicative of a sociological process, as the E3 still formulated policy without any intervention from other MS. Only at a later stage did Solana become the central interlocutor between Iran and the E3 and played an important role in the negotiations: Solana's successor, Catherine Ashton, was acknowledged by her US-American counterparts for keeping the negotiations alive in 2010 (Bergenäs 2010; Cronberg 2017).

The leadership of the E3 was put to the test when they wanted to flank their policy through sanctions, which required the unanimous support of all MS. Some MS were strongly opposed to sanctions in the beginning, and Austria vetoed a decision on sanctions on Iran in 2007 (Sauer 2019). Austria and other MS only agreed to support the comprehensive sanctions regime after Germany, Iran's biggest European trading partner, threw its full support behind it. While the losses of individual MS weigh equally heavy on their economy, Germany's willingness to lose out – given that it stood to lose most from the sanctions – motivated a general commitment among, and expectation to comply of, the other MS. Their adherence was thus organised through the demonstrated commitment and leadership of Germany that shaped the choices of the other MS in such a way that it would have been inappropriate for other MS to block the policy (Cronberg 2017).

Overall, while the inception of the negotiations with Iran was fully intergovernmental and in line with the projections of distributive-bargaining institutionalism, the response by other MS and their insistence on the involvement of the HR/VP strongly correlate with sociological theory. The E3 had created extraordinary circumstances through their trilateral initiative. Through the inclusion of the HR/VP, they had a guaranteed channel of information relay. In this way, the leadership of France, Germany and the UK was more legitimate vis-à-vis the other MS. While other MS seem aware that the large MS have further-going prerogatives, they nonetheless expect to be involved and informed about negotiations and their support for the informal coalition is organised through the demonstration of good and committed leadership.

Ukraine crisis

The Ukraine crisis erupted over the Association Agreement between the EU and Ukraine, which then-President Yanukovych cancelled last minute. In its first response to the Maidan demonstrations, the German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier chose the format of the "Weimar triangle", itself an informal coalition consisting of France, Germany, and Poland. Not officially an emissary of, but informally relaying their activity back to their colleagues sitting in Brussels, they facilitated an agreement reached between government and opposition, which they signed "for the European Union" (Middelaar 2019, 79).

This first initiative broke down quickly after Russia invaded Crimea in February 2014. It was taken up again by France and Germany at the anniversary of the Allied landing in Normandy, bringing about the "Normandy Format" between France, Germany, Russia, and Ukraine, which would become the central contact group for the Ukraine crisis. The Normandy Format negotiated the Minsk agreements, which form the central tenet of EU policy towards resolving the crisis in Ukraine. The format has been recognised by the other MS through the EU sanctions regime, which directly relates the lifting of sanctions to the successful implementation of the Minsk agreements. These negotiations are currently ongoing as the conflict in Eastern Ukraine continues.

The relationship with Russia is particularly delicate for EU foreign policy, as MS' positions have historically diverged significantly (Härtel 2019). As a result of this, some MS stand to lose a lot more than other MS (in economic and political terms) from good or bad relations with Russia. In so far, the presence of Poland in the first trilateral initiative is significant. Poland has been one of the MS most critical of Russia, one of the "New Cold Warriors" (Vitkus 2015, 9). As such, their presence assuaged concerns by MS more critical of the Russian Federation and gave legitimacy to the German initiative. This is also a clear indication that the leadership coalition did not operate out of power-based ability but out of concerns for the appropriateness of their actions and the balance of positions among MS (Fix 2010; Seibel 2015; Vitkus 2015).

Some MS nonetheless complained about "too little Europe" in the Weimar triangle initiative, indicating that any leadership coalition would face similar scrutiny by other

MS (Middelaar 2019, 79). The Franco-German leadership through the Normandy Format, however, was then fully supported by the Council from the very beginning (Härtel 2019). Distributive bargaining institutionalism would expect to be the UK, the only other MS on par with France and Germany, to be present within the coalition. However, France's and Germany's position vis-à-vis Russia is significantly more to the centre of the range of MS' Russia policies. This gave them an advantageous position to mediate between more hawkish and dovish MS, ensuring that their leadership would not be contested as to be too one-sided (Helwig 2019, Vitkus 2015). Taken together with the presence of Poland at the first "Weimar Triangle" initiative, this strongly suggests social processes at play in the formation of the informal leadership coalition.

Again, the European institutions were more proactive in trying to gain a seat at the table. Shortly after the Russian invasion of Crimea, Council President Van Rompuy tried to open a channel to negotiate directly with Putin. This was met with strict opposition by the Polish representatives to the EU, who were worried Van Rompuy could potentially make concessions behind their back, and Van Rompuy had to cancel the trip last minute (Middelaar 2019) – even though channelling talks with Moscow through the EU would have formally enhanced Polish influence over policymaking. Leadership by an informal coalition was preferred by non-involved MS – a behaviour hard to reconcile with distributive-bargaining institutionalism, where Poland would reluctantly accept leadership by the more powerful MS but would not have an active preference for it over common action.

For Franco-German leadership to be effective, they also needed to demonstrate commitment. The establishment of sanctions proved a difficult venture, as some MS stood to lose significantly more than other MS. Many MS, for instance, Austria and Italy, were reluctant to impose sanctions. Only after Germany showed readiness to (also) lose economically in favour of a strong political response, other MS perceived German leadership on the issue as legitimate (Fix 2018). Franco-German leadership was further solidified after France cancelled the 1.2 billion EUR contract for Mistral warships with Russia – both Germany and France thus demonstrated the importance of their policy through the foregoing of economic gains for the sake of a common European response (Vitkus 2015).

Furthermore, they also actively linked their efforts back to other MS and the EU – another indication that informal leadership groups do not operate in the black box of "extraordinary circumstances", as distributive-bargaining theory would suggest, but that processes of legitimation of leadership are taking place. The first instance of this is the Weimar triangle negotiations in Kyiv, during which they had open channels with their colleagues in Brussels. Exemplary of this is also the involvement of Italian, British and EU officials in a preparatory meeting for the Normandy Format in October 2014 (Bundesregierung 2014); or their direct reporting of the February 2015 Normandy format results to the European Council even before talking to the press (Middelaar 2019).

As a result, France and Germany were able to rally the support of the other MS. Even those States most reluctant to apply sanctions would not reject Franco-German

leadership as they feared isolation in EU policymaking (Härtel 2019). Similarly, other relatively pro-Russian MS, such as Hungary or Slovakia, limited their criticism and ultimately supported both the Normandy Format and Franco-German leadership in sanctions policy (Vitkus 2015).

Germany and France self-selected their leadership group, but they were able to exercise EU leadership because they showed commitment and functioned as a broker between more hawkish and dovish MS. While other MS had strong policy preferences themselves, Franco-German leadership was perceived as legitimate because they also bore a significant share of the costs of severing economic ties with Russia. Both during the group formation and in its work – through information-sharing with and mediating between MS – the informal coalition fulfilled a socially constituted leadership role.

Conclusion

Informal coalitions are a constant feature of both CFSP processes as well as of European foreign policy more generally. When these coalitions go beyond the formal CFSP procedures and assume informal leadership over EU foreign policy, other MS are quick to react to intergovernmental initiatives and demand "more Europe". Nonetheless, the leadership coalitions remain active not "at the disposal of the Council" but at their own direction in both investigated cases. There are, however, clearly observable communicative processes in which the leading MS justify and legitimise their leadership with regards to the other MS. Even in the Iran negotiations, which had started as a fully intergovernmental enterprise, the other MS managed to get a seat at the table through the HR/VP, and remained informed about and included in the negotiation process.

While the self-selection of the leadership group can be explained by the relative distribution of power in the case of the EU-Iran negotiations, the selection process at play in response to the Ukraine crisis is more in line with sociological predictions, where MS' relative positions also proved important in determining the composition of the coalition. This may also be indicative of a change over time towards a more social roles-based CFSP as the result of repeated interaction and socialisation. However, more research, ideally with participant interviews, would be required to validate this thesis.

After the original inception of the group, the leadership coalition actively works to demonstrate good leadership and organise support from the other MS – through regular exchange of information, demonstration of commitment, and mediation between the other MS, much in line with the predictions of sociological institutionalism. In both cases, the leadership coalitions were ultimately successful in mobilising other MS for their policy, evidenced by the unanimous passing of EU sanctions against Iran and Russia, respectively.

To successfully pass sanctions, the leadership coalitions demonstrated their commitment to incur large economic losses themselves, which created a sense of responsibility among the other MS to follow their lead. It becomes clear that one cannot

fully disregard the element of relative power in the formation of informal leadership groups, but that a sociological account of the intra-EU dynamics has more explanatory value in these cases – leadership is exercised mainly through sociological processes of legitimation of policy that are, however, partially dependent on material power-based factors.

This supports a more supranational reading of the EU's CFSP but also invites further research into the relationship between material and ideational factors inside and outside Council meetings. Neither a fully intergovernmental approach nor a wholly supranational social theory of CFSP can explain MS behaviour in these cases. Generally, more attention should be paid to the bilateral and multilateral relations between MS rather than to the formal institutions and processes involved in CFSP decision-making alone. More research is required to properly understand how and if the phenomenon of leadership groups provides an effective vehicle for the formulation and implementation of EU foreign policy.

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