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The Relationship between Economic Performance and the Rise of 'Unholy Alliances' in the European Union

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Research Article

The Relationship between Economic Performance and the Rise of 'Unholy Alliances' in the European Union

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Abstract

This article investigates the phenomenon of 'unholy alliances': grand coalitions and ideologically-incoherent coalitions in the EU. In the last decade, these types of government majorities have proliferated, even in countries that have not previously experienced them. This substantial increase happened during the years of the so-called Great Recession, together with the electoral growth of populist movements and new political parties. This article investigates the potential correlation between these 'unholy alliances' and the economic situation of countries. The hypothesis is that negative economic trends might have led to fragmented electoral results, a decrease in the support for mainstream parties and the growth of populist parties and new parties. This generated additional difficulties in forming homogeneous coalitions, forcing the birth of these unholy alliances.

Keywords

In the last decade, European voters have become familiar with grand coalitions and ideologically-incoherent majorities, something that was previously considered rare. Safire's Political Dictionary defines these government's majority arrangements as 'unholy alliances' (UAs) and the parties involved as 'strange bedfellows' (2008: 132). Until recently, these arrangements were considered as an exception to the rule or a working arrangement for 'special' times. Indeed, around fifteen years ago it would have been hard to think of the United Kingdom (UK) being governed by an ideologically-uneven coalition during peacetime. However, UAs are now regularly occurring in both countries using proportional representation and majority election systems.

As of 31 December 2007, before the so-called Great Recession (GR), there were six UA governments among the 28 European Union (EU) member states. Ten years later (at 31 December 2017), a total of 16 EU countries experienced such forms of government.[1] What are the reasons for this increase? Is there any correlation with the economic situation of a country? Does a country's economic trajectory influence the formation of a UA?

UAs are never formed before elections and they are always associated with high levels of fragmentation in parliament. When electoral results produce no clear winners, no ideologically-coherent majorities can be formed, so UA majorities become an option in order not to force the country into political paralysis and to avoid a second election. Consequently, this article focuses on UAs formed after general elections, rather than those arising from government crises or during parliamentary terms. In doing so, the electoral event is strictly linked to the (obliged) choice to form grand coalitions and ideologically-incoherent majorities.

Having assumed that UAs are the result of a 'lack of numbers' in parliament, this article aims to determine if there is a correlation between the economic situation of countries and the formation of UAs. Are UAs an indirect consequence of the Great Recession and of the political crisis that followed in many European countries? This paper hypothesises that poor economic indicators favour

fragmented election results and thus necessitate the building of grand coalitions and ideologically-incoherent coalitions in order to have working governments. The idea is to look at UAs formed in the years before and after the GR and to check four of the most relevant economic indicators (GDP real growth rate, change in the unemployment rate, change in youth unemployment rate, Gini index).

The GR began in December 2007 in the United States and rapidly expanded to Europe.[2] It touched every corner of the continent and shaped its economic, cultural and political affairs. Existing research has focused on the severity of the economic downturn and its impact on different political environments and segments of the population. This article aims to provide readers with a picture of coalition formation in EU countries in the context of the GR.

After this introduction, the next section outlines the definitions employed and offers a short history of UAs. The third section focuses on the rise of populist parties in the years of the GR, offered as a reason for the increasing complexity in forming 'coherent' government majorities. The fourth section investigates UAs in the EU and proposes a classification of government types per country. Section five deals with the core of this research: checking the potential correlation between countries' economic situations and the formation of UAs.

UNHOLY ALLIANCES AND STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

The study of coalitions holds a relevant place in the political science literature. Much has been published on how coalitions form, under which conditions and what causes them to fall apart (Laver and Shepsle 1990; de Swann 1973). Grand Coalitions are a unique sub-species of coalition government in developed democracies. They too have been an object of scholarly research, yet the number of cases has remained relatively low for several years and most of research has been conducted as single case studies (Proksch and Slapin 2006; Helms 2006).

A grand coalition is an alliance in which the two leading parties, usually from the right and the left, unite in a coalition government (Strøm 1983). In the past they have been considered as a regular feature of 'consociational democracy', and in Continental Europe they were defined as a consequence of the 'fragmentation of political culture' (Lijphart 1969: 207). Dahrendorf believed that grand coalitions were a 'cartel of elites' (1967: 11) and, in their assemblage, Lijphart highlighted the 'ability to transcend cleavages and to join in a common effort with the elites of rival subcultures' (1969: 216). More recently, however, grand coalitions have been often considered as exceptions. That is why scholars sometimes refer to them and to the parties involved as 'unholy alliances' and 'strange bedfellows' (Safire 2008: 132). These definitions can have negative connotations and have been widely adopted by media and shape public opinion (Plasser and Ulram 2003).

'Normal' government coalitions should resemble pre-election arrangements or be at least ideologically-coherent. In this sense, UAs can be considered as 'signs of resistance' for mainstream parties. They are inevitable arrangements which are made to provide governments to countries, due to the increasing fragmentation and the difficulty to integrate populist parties in the traditional dynamics of government formation:

> While grand coalitions can be formed for many reasons, the rise of populist parties are challenging conventional party systems, exhausting and discrediting many classic coalition formulas, and shrinking the room for manoeuvre of large parties (along with their vote share). (Jacoby 2017: 1)

Grand coalitions have been extensively studied in the EU Parliament (Kreppel and Hix 2003; Hix 2009) and as single case studies, with a particular emphasis on Germany (von Wahl 2008), while not

much work has been done at a comparative level. In contemporary Germany the term 'Grosse Koalition' describes a governing coalition of the Christian Democrats (CDU together with the Bavarian CSU) and the Social Democrats, the two largest mainstream parties. The first experience came after the inconclusive result of the 2005 German federal election, when neither of the traditional coalitions could form a majority government. Germany already enjoyed previous experiences of grand coalition: in 1923 and in 1928-1930, in the Weimar Republic, and in 1966 when the SPD and CDU decided to support the Kiesinger government (Gassert 2006). For instance, comparing the Kiesinger Grand Coalition government of 1966–69 with the Merkel Grand Coalition government of 2005–09 helped in explaining leadership styles and policy outcomes within the constraints of a Grand Coalition (Olsen 2011).

Jacoby described three logics that stand behind parties' choices for grand coalitions. Firstly 'renovation', where mainstream parties form grand coalitions together to pursue policy goals unreachable in smaller coalitions. Secondly 'clientelism', where parties enter grand coalitions in order to provide benefits for their constituencies and for themselves. Thirdly 'sterilization', in which grand coalitions are a strategy for large parties to limit the room for manoeuvre of (often new) parties 'unacceptable to one or both of them' (2017: 331). When no other coalition is stable or is considered numerically feasible (Strøm and Nyblade 2009), the chosen arrangement for mainstream parties of the left and the right is often to keep 'new parties' and populist parties out of government (Mral, Khosravinik and Wodak 2013), forming a 'cordon sanitaire', a term introduced in the late 1980s in Belgium. At that time, because the far-right Flemish nationalist Vlaams Blok was considered as a racist group, all the other Belgian parties decided to exclude it from any coalition government and preferred to negotiate the formation of grand coalitions instead. Other notable examples of cordons sanitaires existed in Italy towards the neo-fascist MSI and in France against the Front National. The logic behind it is the same: the necessity to exclude a challenger that is considered unworthy to be part of any possible coalition (Stefuriuc 2013).

Belgium is one of the countries with the largest history in UAs, especially in grand coalitions, starting with the case of the Catholic-Liberal grand coalitions in the early Nineteenth century. While in Austria, for instance, 'a grand coalition was formed soon after WWII, when the country was occupied by the allied forces (…) the external threats impressed on the elites the need for internal unity and cooperation' (Lijphart 1969: 217).

This article partially extends the 'classic' definition of grand coalitions to coalitions which include minor parties that are ideologically distant from the mainstream one. This is the case of Italy, where Renzi and Gentiloni's cabinets (all centre-left prime ministers) could be formed only with the key support of the centre-right Nuovo Centrodestra (NCD) as a minor partner in the government's majority (while the 2013 Letta's centre-left post-election cabinet, being firstly supported by the mainstream centre-right PDL, resembled a 'classic' grand coalition).

The same applies for the 2010 Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition in the UK. Following the 2010 general election resulting in a hung parliament with the Conservatives as the largest party, the Liberal Democrats and Conservatives agreed to enter a formal coalition. In the UK, the archetypal grand coalition would obviously be a Conservative-Labour one – the two long-term mainstream rival parties. However, because since the Second World War Conservatives and Liberal Democrats at the national level have always been in opposition to each other, this coalition can be also considered 'ideologically-incoherent'.

These ideologically-incoherent coalitions are also frequent in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), especially in Latvia, the Czech Republic and Slovakia (Foy 2016; Cabada, Hloušek and Jurek 2014: 138-139). In fact, for many CEE young democracies, where it is difficult to highlight 'long-term

mainstream rival parties' (Kreuzer and Pattai 2003) and personality-based parties are the norm (Gherghina 2015), these are frequent arrangements that can be compared to grand coalitions.

POPULIST PARTIES DURING THE GREAT RECESSION

The rise of populist parties helps us understand both the heightened frequency of grand coalitions in countries that have long used them – such as Germany and Austria – and also the rise of 'unlikely governments' in countries with little prior experience of UAs (Lochocki 2016).

Measuring populism has always been difficult. Knowing which party is populist and which is not has been a contentious topic in political science since at least the early 2000s. However, several prominent studies have set the ground for a common interpretative background (Taggart 2004, Roodujin and Pauwels 2011, Müller 2016, Mudde 2004). Drawing from that and considering all the 28 EU member states, in 2007 23 populist parties were represented in national parliaments. Ten years later, the number of populist parties represented in European national parliaments was 34.

Table 1 highlights the vote share held by populist parties in 2007 and in 2017. Political movements such as the Team Stronach in Austria, the Five Stars Movement (M5S) in Italy, the Free Party in Estonia were barely in their founders' minds at the beginning of the GR. Nevertheless, at 31 December 2017 populist parties held a vote share of 18.44 per cent in national parliaments in the EU. The proportion of parliamentary seats held is slightly lower: 16.63 per cent. Ten years earlier these numbers were much smaller: 7.79 per cent and 5.65 per cent, respectively.

Table 1. Populist parties in the EU national parliaments

	Number of Populist Parties represented in Parliaments	Average vote share of Populist Parties in national parliaments (EU-28)	Average seat share of Populist Parties in national parliaments (EU-28)
31 December 2007	23*	7.79%	5.65%
31 December 2017	34**	18.44%	16.33%

Source: Author's elaboration on OECD data (2017d). Note: *In 2007 populist parties were represented in national parliaments of Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria (2 parties), Croatia, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Greece (2), Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Netherlands (2), Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia (2), Spain. **In 2017, populist parties were represented in national parliaments in Austria (2), Belgium, Bulgaria (2), Croatia (2), Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany (2), Greece (2), Hungary, Ireland, Italy (2), Latvia, Lithuania (2), Netherlands (3), Poland, Romania (2), Slovakia (4), Spain, and Sweden.

The variance between vote percentages and number of seats is obviously driven by the different electoral systems, which by their nature tend to stretch or minimise certain percentages when it comes to apportionment. Electoral systems matter: for instance, Front National in France and UKIP in the United Kingdom scored tremendous successes and gained many votes, but their return in number of seats was poor.

Since the GR, many European countries have experienced a prolonged period of electoral turmoil with growing contingents of dissatisfied voters. In many cases, voters have punished incumbents amidst negative perceptions of the state of the economy, a collapse of growth figures and surging unemployment (Kriesi 2014). The GR has proved to be a 'social earthquake'. In Italy, in 2007 there

were 2.5 million of families below the poverty line. Eight years later this had doubled to 5 million. The same applied for 'families in relative poverty', of which there were 5 million in 2007 and 8.5 million in 2015 (OECD 2017d). In Belgium, a 2014 report showed that the number of children living in poverty stood at 420,000, a figure which had doubled since 2007 (KBS 2014: 4).

Research conducted before the GR recognised a moderate confirmation rate for national governments in Western Europe (Keman 2011). Bouvet and King (2013) showed that in the 35 national elections held in the 27 OECD countries during the years of the GR, only in eight cases were incumbents confirmed. Mainstream parties, especially in Western Europe, have been severely punished by voters where the economic conditions were getting worse. According to Kriesi (2014: 34), in Western Europe political parties which were part of governmental majorities lost an average of 3.6 per cent in the following elections, whilst the Prime Ministers' parties lost 5.1 per cent on average (2014: 34). Major gains were scored by radical and 'new parties'. Consequently, these political parties seemed to have increased their vote in inverse relation to countries' economic performance (Hughes 2011).

Kriesi (2014) analysed electoral results in 30 European countries. His research design included two national elections for each country until November 2008 and all the elections held before July 2014. 107 elections were considered (two for each country, plus an additional one for Austria that voted in September 2008 at the beginning of the GR) – 61 are pre-crisis and 46 post-crisis. Reflecting on the correlation between economic indicators and the confirmation rate of the incumbent governments, Kriesi (2014) observed that, while in Central and Eastern Europe there has not been a significant impact of the economic situation on the electoral results of incumbent governments, in Western Europe the influence has been high, revealing at the same time a massive growth of right-wing populist movements, radical left movements, and new parties in general (Hino 2012). It is in these years, during and after the GR, that UAs significantly increased.

UNHOLY ALLIANCES IN THE EU (2007–2017)

Recently, Cas Mudde (2017) provided a comprehensive picture of contemporary European politics:

> Most European countries have seen a sharp decline in electoral support for established parties (…) and [it] has significantly increased during the GR. The combination of decreasing loyalty and increasing voice leads to fragmented and polarised party systems, which make it more difficult to form coalition governments – as we have seen in Greece and Spain, where new elections were necessary to break the deadlock.

At the same time 'new parties' and 'populist parties' are increasing their votes in several countries (Hartleb and Ostheimer 2014) and many of these political organisations are difficult to be integrated. Some are considered too radical by potential coalition partners, while others – such as the Italian M5S - were explicitly born on a platform which forbade coalitions with other parties (Bordignon and Ceccarini 2013).[3] It is a situation which complicates post-election negotiations and certainly contributed to the increase of UAs. 'New parties' are significantly on the rise: in 13 EU countries at least one new-born party came straight up to be represented in parliament (19 cases in total). For instance, the 2014 Slovenian Parliamentary Election was characterised by as many as three new parties which successfully gained seats, two of which were formed around the charismatic leaderships of former Prime Ministers Cerar and Bratušek.

Table 2 shows an overview of UAs in national governments in the EU. In the decade 1997–2007, only two UAs were formed. Here, the most notable examples came from the Netherlands: the two Kok 'purple' cabinets were called as such because they contained both the social-democratic Labour Party (red) and the liberal People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (blue). In the decade 2007–2017, however, 16 EU countries experienced governments led by UAs.

Table 2. EU countries governed by 'Unholy Alliances' (grand coalitions, ideologically-incoherent coalitions)

At 31.12.2017	Countries that also experienced UAs in the period 31.12.2007-31.12.2017	At 31.12.2007	Countries that also experienced UAs in the period 31.12.1997-31.12.2007
Croatia Germany Italy Lithuania Slovenia Slovakia	Austria Belgium Bulgaria Czech Republic Finland Greece Luxembourg Netherlands Romania United Kingdom	Austria Belgium Bulgaria Finland Germany Luxembourg	Netherlands Slovakia

Source: Author's elaboration on NSD data (2017).

It is not always simple to identify the reason that accounts for the formation of UA and why in some countries they have been formed, but not in others. Bearing in mind the three major possible reasons as stated above (national crises, only stable alternative and cordons sanitaires), it becomes immediately clear how the second and third options coincide, where 'only stable alternative' reflects a lack of confidence towards other political parties represented in Parliament. In 2007-2017, the only country where the reason for forming a grand coalition seems to be a situation of 'national crisis' is Belgium in 2011, where the Di Rupo government was sworn in after a record-breaking 541 days of negotiations following the 2010 elections. Grand coalitions formed as cordons sanitaires, appear to be the majority. As Jacoby (2017: 331) argues:

> European populism of both the left and right has made sterilization relatively more important in recent years (…) both the long-running euro crisis and the more recent refugee flows have pushed the sterilization logic closer to the forefront of large party choices.

Some of the cases reported in Table 2 are well-known. For example, Germany has always been considered as the epitome for grand coalitions, while Italy and the UK represent other high-profile examples. On the other hand, some smaller EU countries have not attracted as much scholarly attention. In the Czech Republic, for instance, in January 2014, Bohuslav Sobotka became the first left-wing prime minister after six years of right-wing political control. He started the negotiations with the intention to exclude the incumbent centre-right OSD from the coalition. He was then able to form a grand coalition government which included the new ANO 2011 party and the centrist Christian and Democratic Union–Czechoslovak People's Party (Groszkowski 2013). In Croatia, the Plenkovic government has been defined by Viseslav Raos as a 'combination of liberals and conservatives [which] is atypical for Croatia's political culture' (Reuters 2017).

ECONOMIC INDICATORS AND UNHOLY ALLIANCES

The hypothesis that economic fluctuations influence electoral results has been upheld several times. It is based on the idea that incumbent governments are considered accountable for the economic situation (Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier 2007). If the economy is good, voters will reward the incumbent and confirm them in power, whereas in a troubled economy the electorate will punish the incumbent and vote for opposition parties (Duch and Stevenson 2008; 2005; Costa Lobo and Lewis-Beck 2012). In the years of the GR, there have been several studies concerning election results and economic indicators (Bellucci, Costa Lobo and Lewis-Beck 2012). More recently, Giugni and Grasso (2018) analysed citizens' experiences and reactions to the GR in Europe, showing that lower social classes were particularly hard hit and that GR can be considered as a driver of populist attitudes. Parker and Tsarouhas (2018) specifically investigated the causes and consequences of the economic crisis in four countries of the Eurozone 'periphery': Greece, Ireland, Portugal and Spain. In doing so, they highlight the link between the decline of these countries' economies and the consequent political fragility.

The 16 countries that experienced UAs in the time span 2007-2017 were studied, leading to the analysis of 62 elections occurring in the period, making sure to include one election before the GR (2007). This leads to the identification of 28 cases of UAs arranged after elections and 34 cases of 'classic' government majorities. The GR is thus taken as a relevant factor, both for its impact on the economic indicators and as an 'inevitable' contextual element to be considered in a comparative analysis which includes more than 10 years of elections in 16 European countries.

There is agreement that macroeconomic issues matter for political evaluations. Previous work has suggested that inflation, unemployment and economic growth are important issues for voters (Chappell 1990: 314). People also generally rely more on the media for information about issues outside of their reach or personal experience, such as the current and future state of the economy (Hester and Gibson 2003), meaning the economic reality they perceive is mediated (Boef and Kellstedt 2004). Common indicators such as GDP growth and unemployment rate are the ones that are usually mentioned by mass media and politicians when addressing the state of the economy. In other words, these are the most well-known economic indicators among voters (Su 2008). For this reason, this analysis uses these simple economic indicators and focuses on arithmetic means. The idea is to illustrate the general economic cycle as it was portrayed in the news and, probably, felt by citizens. The results are presented in table 3.

Looking at the economic data for the year of the elections only, most of the correlations seem to be counter-intuitive: the only parameter which seems to be in line with the initial hypothesis is the one concerning the annual variation of the Gini Index: UA formation happens in election years when there is a slight increase in inequality (total +0.059, average +0.00188). At the same time, in these 16 countries during the ten-year period, 'normal' governments are formed in the presence of a slight decrease of inequalities (cumulative Gini Index -0.1, annually averaged at -0.003).

However, this is only a partial analysis because considering the election years does not provide an accurate picture of the long-term economic trend perceived by voters. Hence, to provide a more structured analysis, the same indicators were observed in the 16 countries for all the years between one election and another. This was achieved by obtaining the cumulative data and calculating an average annual rate for each country.

Looking at the cumulative economic data, the results are more in line with the research hypothesis. In order to measure this possible correlation the average annual GDP growth rate for each legislature was added together, then divided by the number of years of the legislature. There are thus 97 years of legislature which preceded UAs and 125 years of legislature which were not

followed by elections that generated UAs. The average GDP annual growth rate in the years before elections leading to UAs is +1.59 per cent, while the same indicator in the years before elections which did not lead to UAs was higher, at +2.23 per cent. As shown in Table 3, the same trend applies for the average annual change in unemployment rate: -0.06 per cent in the years before elections resulting in UAs, -0.19 per cent for elections which did not result in UAs. The youth unemployment rate goes in the same direction. Here, the change in youth unemployment rate is around 0 per cent for the years before UAs and on average fell by 0.34 per cent when UAs were not returned.

The same correlation was then tested excluding Greece, which is the country with the most 'extreme' economic data and that may have driven most of the figures. Without the Greek case, the average GDP annual growth rate in the years before elections followed by UAs is +1.88 per cent, while in the years before elections not followed by UAs it is +2.46 per cent. As expected, also the unemployment rate data go in the same direction and reinforces the research hypothesis.

Table 3. Economic indicators and Unholy Alliances in the EU

	Years of legislature preceding elections which led to UA	Years of legislature preceding elections which did not lead to UA
GDP annual growth rate*	+1.59%	+2.23%
GDP annual growth rate without Greece**	+1.88%	+2.46%
GDP Western Europe***	+0.91%	+1.04%
GDP Eastern Europe****	+2.59%	+3.23%
Unemployment Rate	-0.06%	-0.19%
Unemployment Rate without Greece	-0.25%	-0.21%
Unemployment Rate Western Europe	+0.48%	-0.13%
Unemployment Rate Eastern Europe	-0.81%	-0.41%
Youth Unemployment Rate	<0.00%	-0.34%
Youth Unemployment Rate without Greece	-0.37%	-0.43%
Youth Unemployment Rate Western Europe	+1.32%	-0.61%
Youth Unemployment Rate Eastern Europe	-1.92%	-0.29%

Sources: World Bank (2017), Eurostat (2017a; 2017b), OECD (2017a; 2017b; 2017c). Notes: annual average for the years of legislature before the government formation. *General indicator: 28 cases for UA, 34 cases for non-UA. **Indicator without Greece: 26 cases for UA, 30 cases for non-UA. ***Western Europe indicator: 17 cases for UA, 16 cases for non-UA. ****Eastern Europe indicator: 11 cases for UA, 18 cases for non-UA.

Repeating the same analysis and isolating the Eastern European countries (Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Lithuania, Romania, Slovenia, Slovakia), which include 11 cases of UAs, results in an averaged GDP annual growth rate of +2.59 per cent, while the same value is at +3.23 per cent for the years before elections that did not generate UAs. This shows how Eastern European countries drive the GDP rate variable, also considering that the Western European nations (Greece included) score an annual average of +0.91 per cent for the years before UAs and +1.04 per cent for the years before elections not followed by UAs. Regarding change in youth unemployment, Eastern Europe countries

seem to move in the opposite direction: in the years before elections generating UAs the unemployment rate decreased by 1.92 per cent, while in the years before elections which did not lead to UAs the same indicator decreased by only 0.29 per cent.

The annual variation in the Gini Index also seems to confirm the research hypothesis: the formation of UAs occur when there is a slight increase in inequalities (averaged at +0.04), while the years before elections which led to 'normal' government coalitions show a slight decrease in inequalities (averaged at -0.01).

Looking at countries at an individual level (table 4), most countries seem to match the research hypothesis that bad economic indicators lead to fragmented election results, generating UAs, but the pattern is more mixed.

Table 4. Economic indicators in countries that experienced UAs

	GDP annual growth rate*		Change in Unemployment rate (annual)*		Change in Youth Unemployment Rate (annual)*	
	%		%		%	
	UA**	Non-UA**	UA**	Non-UA**	UA**	Non-UA**
Austria	2.05	0.87	0.04	0.28	0.26	0.43
Belgium	1.44	1.24	0.02	0.28	0.58	0.45
Bulgaria	2.69	3.15	-1.97	-0.45	-0.85	-0.56
Croatia	-1.55	2.52	-0.72	-0.11	0.09	-0.23
Czech Republic	1.06	3.16	0.07	-0.28	0.98	0.93
Finland	1.66	-0.06	-0.08	0.06	0.04	-0.19
Germany	0.35	2.23	-0.06	-0.56	0.8	-0.6
Greece	-6.31	0.64	3.37	1.08	7.6	0.17
Italy	-1.42	1.13	0.91	-0.69	2.78	-1.63
Lithuania	1.03	7.55	0.6	-1.45	1.11	-2.13
Luxembourg	3.08	2.75	0.38	0.2	1.02	-0.66
Netherlands	1.37	1.23	0.37	-0.01	0.79	0
Romania	6.83	2.87	-0.48	0.25	-0.85	0.45
Slovakia	4.65	3.12	-2.83	0.04	-2.74	0.97
Slovenia	-0.27	2.53	0.58	0.16	1.44	0.09
United Kingdom	0.37	2.22	0.4	-0.37	1.43	-0.76

Source: World Bank (2018) and OECD (2018).
Notes: *Yearly averages per year of legislature. **Years of legislature before UA and Non-UA governments.

Italy had tenuous growth before the 2006 and 2008 general elections (averaged annually at +1 per cent and +0.15 per cent, respectively) while it suffered -1.06 per cent in annual average GDP before the 2013 general elections which led to the UA that supported the Letta government. The UK shows a similar trend with an annual average of +2.73 per cent in the four years before the 2005 general election, +2.07 per cent in the five years before the 2015 election, +1.86 per cent in the two years before the 2017 general election, but only +0.37 per cent before the 2010 general elections which led to the coalition between the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats. The youth unemployment rate in both Italy and the UK follows a similar trend, with youth unemployment increasing before the elections that led to UAs.

However, there are also cases which do not fit with the research hypothesis. Romania enjoyed an average annual growth in GDP of +2.87 per cent in the 12 years which did not lead to a UA, while before the 2008 general elections which resulted in a grand coalition, the average annual GDP growth rate was +6.83 per cent. Bulgaria saw a decrease in the unemployment rate (-0.45 per cent) in the 11 years before elections that had clear winners, but in the five years which led to two UAs, the unemployment rate decreased further (-1.97 per cent). UAs also happened after years of higher youth unemployment in Croatia, Finland, Germany, Italy, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Slovenia and the UK. On the other hand, countries such as Austria, Romania and Slovakia showed better youth unemployment rate figures in the years which led to the formation of UAs.

In the correlation between unemployment rate and UAs, slight 'outliers' are countries such as Bulgaria, Finland and Romania. More significant counter-trending numbers are the ones scored in Croatia and Slovakia (-0.72% and -0.64% before UAs, -0.11% and -0.42% before non-UAs, respectively). However, other major factors might have affected voters' behaviour and government formation. For Croatia, the 2013 accession to the EU, which dominated the public debate since the early 2000s, is often mentioned as a key determinant in the election outcome (Strielkowski 2013: 55). In Slovakia, political scandals and high levels of corruption have regularly featured news and affected politics (Slovak Spectator 2016; Sicakova-Beblava and Beblavy 2016: 296).

GDP is the most consistent indicator in relation to the formation of UAs. However, in Western Europe, a notable exception is Finland. As shown in Table 4, GDP grew more in the eight years before a UA (+1.66 per cent on annual average) than in the four years before the 2015 parliamentary election which did not bring result in a UA (-0.06 per cent on annual average). Again, country specific issues in Finland, such as political scandals and the debate on sovereign bailout programmes, together with the rise of a very successful populist party, played an important role in the formation of a UA. Several scandals dominated Finnish political life before the 2011 parliamentary election. Many politicians in the governing Centre and National Coalition parties received dubious funding from external sources and secret extra-marital affairs brought negative attention to both the former Foreign Minister Ilkka Kanerva and former Prime Minister Matti Vanhanen (Triloqvist 2012). Public confidence in politics was at a historic minimum and the European sovereign debt crisis was another crucial issue in the election. According to opinion polls, nearly 60 per cent of Finns were against the country's participation in European bailout programmes. While all four parties of the governing UA coalition (Centre Party, National Coalition Party, Green League and the Swedish People's Party) supported Finland's participation in the bailout, the populist True Finns were strongly against it (Worth 2011). In the 2011 parliamentary elections, True Finns received 19.1 per cent of the vote and their rise of 15 percentage points was the largest electoral victory for any party in Finland's post-war history. A few weeks after the election, True Finns leader Timo Soini officially announced that they would withdraw from the government formation negotiations due to the bailout issue. Soini said he would prefer to keep to the party's original platform and not compromise its core principles. Subsequently, a six-party grand coalition was formed under the logic of the 'only stable alternative'. Four years later, Soini's party secured 17.6 per cent and, this time, went straight into the new centre-right government coalition.

Obviously, given the variety of countries that have experienced unholy post-electoral alliances in government, the phenomenon cannot be reduced to a mere consequence of economic factors, despite the presence of correlational evidence. Nevertheless, in line with the research hypothesis, populist parties performed better in elections which brought countries to the formation of grand coalitions and ideologically incoherent coalitions than in elections which did not bring about the formation of UAs.

Table 5. Electoral performance of populist parties in the 16 countries which experienced UAs (2007-2017)

	Elections leading to the formation of UAs (%)	Elections not leading to the formation of UAs (%)	Total (%)
Vote Percentages	14.1	10.4	12.2
Seats	13.9	9.8	11.8

Source: Author's elaboration (2018). Notes: 28 cases for UA. 34 cases for Non-UA.

Table 5 shows the average vote share and the average seat share of populist parties in the 16 countries which experienced UAs between 2007 and 2017. In this analysis, some countries (Belgium and the Czech Republic, for instance) marked a clear trend, while others (Finland and the Netherlands) seemed to go in the opposite direction. In general, however, the electoral rise of populist parties (which has already been highlighted at general level in Table 1) has been higher in elections which brought to UAs. The difference is not enormous but is nevertheless notable and suggests support for the main hypothesis that the increased fragmentation of party systems caused by the worsening economic situation in many European countries and the consequent fall of mainstream parties and success of populist and new parties, generated further difficulties in forming homogeneous coalitions.

The relation between the rise of populist parties and the formation of UAs is visibly illustrated in countries such as the Czech Republic and Italy. In the former, in 2013, the new party ANO 2011 went straight into government. In the latter, also in 2013, the M5S scored over 25 per cent of the vote. While Andrej Babis' ANO 2011 was immediately included in the new UA government, the M5S added additional uncertainty to government negotiations because it explicitly rejected any offer of involvement in coalition agreements (Bordignon and Ceccarini 2013: 430). As a result, the centre-left had no other choice than to reach an agreement with their traditional rivals in the centre-right PDL. In next general elections, both ANO and M5S increased their vote shares and went on to enter governing coalitions (ANO in 2017, M5S in 2018).

The rise of new parties and populist parties has also been observed in other CEE countries. In 2009 in Bulgaria, GERB achieved the 52.9 per cent. In 2014, in Slovenia, Miro Cerar's new party (SMC) scored 51.1 per cent. Both results influenced the subsequent government negotiations which brought the formation of two UAs. In March 2016, the populist right-wing Slovak National Party scored 8.6 per cent in the Slovak Parliamentary Election, almost doubling its previous result (4.5 per cent). Centre-left Prime Minister Robert Fico lost his majority and had to face a deeply divided parliament featuring solid Eurosceptics and neo-Nazis. However, after ten days of negotiations, he was able to form a UA coalition which included the Slovak National party, the centre-right liberals and a party representing the country's Hungarian minority – a UA government which contained both the nationalists who have campaigned against greater rights for the country's Hungarian minority, and the party that represents those same Hungarians.

CONCLUSIONS

More and more strangers are becoming 'bedfellows' in the EU. What was previously considered an exception is now becoming almost the rule. UAs have flourished in Western and Eastern Europe, both in countries with proportional representation and majoritarian electoral systems, and in countries with a history of grand coalitions as well as in nations which never experienced them before.

UAs are never offered to voters before elections. They become a necessity when election results are fragmented and there is no ideologically-coherent majority available. UAs can thus be seen as a consequence of the growing fragmentation of politics, where it is increasingly more difficult to reach numbers sufficient to form ideologically-coherent majorities. As shown, populist parties are significantly on the rise: during the GR, in less than ten years, they have more than doubled their electoral support.

This article aimed to test the potential relationship between some of the most relevant economic indicators and the formation of UAs. The research hypothesis was that in periods of poor economic performance, elections would bring fragmented results due to the growth of populist movements and new parties, which are difficult to be included in government majorities. Here the necessity arises to form UAs in order to have working governments. Our first study concerned the economic indicators only for the last year before the vote and this showed none of the expected correlation.

This first analysis was, however, too limited and did not consider more comprehensive economic trends. By expanding the analysis to include all years before an election, the trend seems clearer. UAs are mostly formed after years where the GDP annual growth rate is lower and when employment figures are worse than in the years before elections not followed by UA. Overall, then, when a country's economic situation is fine, UAs are rarer. On the other hand, when unemployment increases and when the annual growth rate is low or even negative, more elections were followed by UAs. Nevertheless, the discussion showed that there are varied experiences between individual countries and that a range of additional factors beyond economic performance were playing a role too. It might be that there is an overall trend, but it is evident from this analysis that the effect of this is not even across all countries.

Whether these unholy alliances will stop being considered 'unholy' and will become just another feature of contemporary European politics is remains to be seen. Nevertheless, this study opens up the field for further research, for example in verifying whether the continued presence of UAs will continue to be driven by economic factors.

ENDNOTES

1 These are: Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Finland, Germany, Greece, Italy, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, United Kingdom.
2 The timing and the scale of the recession varied from country to country. Moreover, the scientific literature on the topic does not always agree about the starting date of the GR. According to the US National Bureau of Economic Research, the GR began in December 2007 and ended in June 2009, thus extending over 19 months (Wall Street Journal 2008). However, in some European countries, GR lasted significantly longer (Weisbrot 2014).
3 While in 2013, M5S firmly rejected any offer to enter in government coalition with other parties, after the 2018 Italian general elections it went into coalition with the right-wing League.

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