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**The Netherlands on European Political Axes:
Coalition-Building, Diplomatic Relations and New Alliances in a Brexit Era**

Jelle R.M. Froot

Master of Science in International Studies

Supervisor:

Dr Inês Marques Ribeiro, Guest Assistant Professor
ISCTE Instituto Universitário de Lisboa

Co-supervisor:

Dr Pedro Seabra, Guest Assistant Professor
ISCTE Instituto Universitário de Lisboa

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Name

Jelle R.M. Floot

Student ID

85806

Programme and faculty

M.Sc. International Studies

ESPP – School of Sociology and Public Policy

Project

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I hope you enjoy reading it as much as I enjoyed writing it.

Jelle R.M. Floom

Resumo

O objetivo deste estudo consistiu em determinar se, e em que medida, houve uma mudança na posição dos Países Baixos no processo de formação de coligações da União Europeia, centrando-se na fase pré-Brexit, com início no referendo Brexit no Reino Unido (23 de Junho de 2016) e desfecho na retirada formal do Reino Unido (31 de Janeiro de 2020). A saída do Reino Unido da UE resultou numa reorientação económica e demográfica para o sul e leste da UE. Isso suscita algumas questões sobre a posição dos Países Baixos numa UE pós-Brexit. Sob as lentes do intergovernamentalismo liberal e construtivismo, verificámos uma atitude mais assertiva dos Países Baixos em relação à UE como resultado direto da perda de um importante parceiro liberal e um peso-pesado. Assistimos a um aumento de eventos de *networking* durante a fase pré-Brexit, que visavam reforçar as relações diplomáticas com outros Estados-Membros, e o mesmo se verificou no discurso político e nos eventos em que as visões para a UE (e o seu futuro) foram explicitamente abordadas. Constatou-se que os Países Baixos têm vindo a assumir um papel de liderança ativa na formação de novas coligações para assegurar os seus interesses numa UE pós-Brexit. Um importante resultado deste processo é a Nova Liga Hanseática, composta por pequenos e médios Estados-Membros do Norte da UE. Um segundo resultado é o aparente papel de liderança dos neerlandeses no seio dos chamados *Frugal Four*. Estas conclusões corroboram os pressupostos de que os Países Baixos participam sobretudo em coligações *ad-hoc* e orientadas para temas específicos.

Palavras-Chave

Brexit, Formação de Coligações, Conselho da União Europeia, Processo de Decisão, Estados-Membros, Países Baixos

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to determine if and to which extent there has been a shift in the position of the Netherlands in European Union coalition-building, focusing on the *pre-Brexit phase* that began with the Brexit referendum in the United Kingdom (23 June 2016) and finished with the UK's formal withdrawal (31 January 2020). The UK's departure from the EU has ensued an economic and demographic shift towards the EU's south and east. This raises questions about the position of the Netherlands in a post-Brexit EU. Using the lenses of Liberal Intergovernmentalism and Constructivism, we found a more assertive attitude of the Netherlands towards the EU as a direct result of the loss of an important liberal and heavyweight partner. We have witnessed an increase in networking events during the pre-Brexit phase, aimed at enhancing diplomatic relations with other Member States, as well as in political discourse and events in which visions for (the future of) the EU were explicitly addressed. It was shown that the Netherlands has come to the fore by undertaking an active leadership role in forging new coalitions to secure its interest in a post-Brexit EU. A prime outcome of this is the New Hanseatic League, comprised of small and medium-sized northern EU Member States. A second result is the apparent Dutch leading role within the so-called Frugal Four. These findings corroborate the assumptions that the Netherlands primarily partakes in ad-hoc, theme-specific coalitions.

Keywords

Brexit, Coalition-Building, Council of the European Union, Decision-Making, Member States, the Netherlands

Table of Contents

Glossary of Acronyms	v
1. Introduction.....	1
1.1. Problem Statement	1
1.2. Research Context and Relevancy.....	2
1.3. Theoretical Framework	3
1.3.1. Liberal Intergovernmentalism	4
1.3.2. Constructivism.....	4
1.4. Research Outline	5
2. State of the Art	6
2.1. The Netherlands as an EU Member State	6
2.1.1. Economic and Political Integration	7
2.1.2. The Increase of Dissonance	8
2.1.3. A Decade of Dutch Leadership by Prime Minister Mark Rutte	10
2.2. Coalition-Building in the EU: Forms of Structural Cooperation	12
2.3. Positioning of the Netherlands in EU Decision-Making Coalitions	18
2.4. Chapter Conclusion.....	24
2.5. Research Question and Hypotheses	25
3. Methodology	27
3.1. Methods of Analysis and Data Collection	27
3.2. Triangulation	27
3.3. Document Analysis	28
3.3.1. Sampling	28
3.4. Discourse Analysis.....	29
3.4.1. Sampling	29

3.5. Self-Completion Questionnaires	29
3.5.1. Sampling	30
3.6. Validity and Reliability	30
3.7. Limitations	31
4. Analysis.....	32
4.1. A Shift in Power Balance	32
4.2. Narrative and Networking.....	36
4.3. EU Coalitions in Motion: Building Bridges or an Ivory Tower?.....	41
4.3.1. The New Hanseatic League	42
4.3.2. Reinforced Ties with France.....	46
4.3.3. The Frugal Four and Germany	47
5. Discussion.....	50
6. Conclusion	56
Bibliography	58
Annexes.....	65
Annex A: Open-ended Questionnaire - Informed Consent Form	66
Annex B: Open-ended Questionnaire – Questions Template	67
Annex C: List of Respondents	68
Annex D: Responses Open-ended Questionnaire	69

Glossary of Acronyms

AIV	Advisory Council on International Affairs
AT	Republic of Austria
BE	Kingdom of Belgium
Benelux	Belgium, the Netherlands, Luxembourg
BG	Republic of Bulgaria
CAP	Common Agriculture Policy
CDA	Christian Democratic Appeal
CFSP	Common Foreign and Security Policy
CH	Swiss Confederation
CU	Christian Union
CY	Republic of Cyprus
CZ	Czech Republic
D66	Democrats '66
ECFR	European Council on Foreign Relations
ECSC	European Coal and Steel Community
EE	Republic of Estonia
EEC	European Economic Community
EL	Hellenic Republic
EMU	European Monetary Union
EP	European Parliament
ES	Kingdom of Spain
ESM	European Stability Mechanism
EU	European Union
DE	Federal Republic of Germany
DK	Kingdom of Denmark
FR	French Republic
FI	Republic of Finland
FVD	Forum for Democracy
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GNI	Gross National Income
HR	Republic of Croatia

HU	Hungary
IE	Ireland
IOB	Policy and Operations Evaluation Department
IT	Italian Republic
LI	Liberal intergovernmentalism
LT	Republic of Lithuania
LV	Republic of Latvia
LU	Grand Duchy of Luxembourg
MFF	Multiannual Financial Framework
MS	Member State(s)
MT	Republic of Malta
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organisation
NB6	Nordic-Baltic Six
NL	Kingdom of the Netherlands
NO	Kingdom of Norway
PL	Republic of Poland
PT	Portuguese Republic
PvdA	Labour Party
PVV	Party for Freedom
OECD	Organisation of Economic Co-Operation and Development
QMV	Qualified Majority Voting
RO	Romania
SE	Kingdom of Sweden
SEA	Single European Act
SI	Republic of Slovenia
SK	Republic of Slovakia
TFEU	Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union
UK	United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland
VVD	People's Party for Freedom and Democracy
V4	Visegrád Four
WTO	World Trade Organisation
WWII	Second World War

“Today we live in a multipolar world, in which a growing number of countries and political leaders seem to believe that international relations are a zero-sum game. This means that the EU, which was built on the power of principles, is increasingly being confronted by the principles of power.” (Mark Rutte, 2019)

1 Introduction

This chapter presents an introductory rundown of the problematisation and context of our research topic as well as its relevancy within the current debate. Furthermore, a brief theoretical framework will be laid out, explaining this dissertation’s adoption of the liberal intergovernmentalist (LI) and constructivist theories, the lenses through which the role of the Netherlands in EU coalition-building is evaluated. Lastly, the research outline will be construed, serving as a guide in organising our dissertation.

1.1. Problem Statement

When neighbouring powers joined forces to ransack the Netherlands and seize its colonies, the Dutch Golden Age, or *Gouden Eeuw*, fell apart in 1672. Ever since, diplomats from the north-western European kingdom have made it principle to never become isolated against a European front (Hellema, 2009; The Economist, 2020). After decades of regional cooperation and integration, the neighbouring countries now cooperate on the basis of what is today known as the European Union (EU). Recent developments in the EU, with reference to the recent withdrawal of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland (UK), also known as ‘Brexit’, have led to a renewed interest in the position of the remaining Member States within the organisation.

The EU could be perceived as a diplomatic playing field. Those aiming to achieve a certain goal, behave a sufficient number of Member States that share a similar perspective in order to implement, or impede the implementation of EU policies. In the present day, the EU counts 27 members cooperating while pushing national agendas. One large alliance of 27 states is how it appears to function at a first glance. Upon closer look, however, one detects many more small divisions and coalitions that at times even include non-EU Member States. Traditional alliances that ensured free movement such as the politico-economic Benelux as well as the Nordic Passport Union have remained intact with the advent of the EU. However, these Member States

do not merely unite together, depending on the policy area. Additional and intertwined divisions and alliances appear simultaneously in the EU political context.

The Dutch Advisory Council on International Affairs (AIV) finds that the Netherlands has traditionally been able to count on the UK as a partner in the diplomatic playing field (AIV, 2018). However, the caprices of world politics signify that today's allies can be tomorrow's rivals. The Prime Minister of the Netherlands, Mark Rutte, declared that the withdrawal of the UK from the EU will not leave his nation unscathed (Cohen, 2016). Much of the trusted collaboration stems from the similar liberal attitude the neighbouring states separated by the North Sea share. The Britons and Dutch have often taken the same line on a number of important areas in Europe. These include, among others, the promotion of a well governed EU with efficient budgetary management and legislation. Furthermore, they are both avid free-market supporters, jointly fought for new trade agreements and advocated for EU expansion with 10 new members in 2004 (AIV, 2018). Brexit will change the geometry of the EU. With the departure of 65 million inhabitants and the EU's second largest economy, its economic and demographic centre of gravity will likely shift to the south and east. This raises questions about the position of the Netherlands in a post-Brexit EU. Thus, the goal of this dissertation is to investigate if and to which extent there has been a shift in the position of the Netherlands towards EU coalition-building, focusing on the transition period leading to Brexit, that began with the UK referendum (23 June 2016) and finished with the moment the UK formally withdrew from the EU (31 January 2020), hereinafter referred to as the *pre-Brexit phase*.

1.2. Research Context and Relevancy

The UK referendum on EU membership on 23 June 2016 produced a narrow majority for Leave. The formal withdrawal of the UK from the EU on 31 January 2020 represents a major milestone in the history of European (dis)integration. An abundance in scientific publications as well as media reports posit that the predominant consequences will concern the Britons themselves (Independent, 2019; CNN, 2019; The Economist, 2019; Csanyi, 2017; Sampson, 2017; Legrain, 2016). However, the loss of one of its largest members is an evenly consequential moment for the EU. As the withdrawal from the organisation is unprecedented,¹ there is a heightened need for the examination of Brexit's aftermath regarding EU negotiations and decision-making in the intergovernmental Council of the European Union (also 'the Council of the EU', 'the

¹ Barring the incomparable, other technical cases of EU withdrawal including Algeria (1962), Greenland (1985) and Saint Barthélemy (2012) (Triandafyllidou & Gropas, 2015).

Council of Ministers’ or simply ‘the Council’, as referred to more colloquially) as well its significance for the relationship between the remaining Member States.

The highly debated economic effects in media reports as well as scientific research for both the UK and the EU have left a gap in terms of the possible effects on the functioning of EU decision-making. As briefly touched upon in section 1.1., the Netherlands is one of the Member States that shares similar policy positions and structurally cooperated with the UK within the framework of the EU (AIV, 2018). Losing a major ally – in terms of population, economic as well as military power – will have a significant impact in terms of defending its influence in the Council. Despite being a mid-sized Member State, other Member States, including Nordic countries and Austria, are hoping the Netherlands will take over the UK’s restraining role in EU negotiations in areas such as the EU budget (Schout, 2018).

Decision-making in the EU has, in recent decades, been subject to lively analyses (Hosli, 1996; Veen, 2011; Keading & Selck, 2005; 2011; Elgström et al., 2001). Nevertheless, surprisingly little scholarly work has surfaced until now regarding the possible consequences for individual Member States, as well as over the measures undertaken by the Netherlands since the UK announced its withdrawal from the EU. Previous research can be considered a first step towards a more profound understanding of the implications of Brexit for the Dutch EU strategy. This allows this dissertation to draw from existing literature and complement it by examining whether or not it is possible to observe changes in the approach from the Netherlands toward the EU.

1.3. Theoretical Framework

As the EU is neither a state nor a traditional international organisation, it represents a heterodox unit of analysis and, hence no single theoretical approach in International Relations provides an adequate, sound, theoretical explanation (Andreatta, 2005). In this dissertation, the liberal intergovernmentalism prism combined with constructivism best serves the purpose as it, on the one hand, involves the entity of a state (the Netherlands) and, on the other hand, an intergovernmental organisation (the EU). Liberal intergovernmentalism beholds the international system as one in which governments operate in two arenas (domestic as well as international) concurrently (Andreatta, 2005).

1.3.1. Liberal Intergovernmentalism

Theoretical analyses of the policy impact and network centrality of Council negotiations rest on the positions that Member States hold in policy formulation and implementation, considering the domestically generated influences and policy preferences. The neoclassical realism paradigm emphasises the role of political leaders in decision-making in the international system; however, the liberal intergovernmentalism prism diverges from this theory by identifying the role of international institutions in delineating and forming the interests and policy preferences of Member States. The liberal debate created the intergovernmentalism school, which considers that national governments merely negotiate at the supranational level with respect to those matters favoured by their domestic constituencies, given how the primary aim is to be elected (Andreatta, 2005). LI draws on insights from international political economy and on both liberal and institutionalist theories of international relations and rests on the assumption that states seek to achieve goals primarily through intergovernmental negotiation and bargaining (Moravcsik, 1998).

To understand the response of the Netherlands to external challenges (i.e. Brexit), it is necessary to understand the relationship between domestic policies and state interests. One particular advantage of the liberal intergovernmentalism theory for this research is noted in the definition of a three-stage process by Moravcsik and Schimmelfennig (2009). The first stage concerns policy demand, the ‘domestic preference formation’. The second stage deals with policy supply, the interstate bargaining. The authors contend that agreements at the supranational level are the results of interstate bargaining and are determined by bargaining power, which appertains to the relative voting power of Member States in the Council of the European Union as well as to the preferences of states. Lastly, stage three, involves supranational institutions, which adds legitimacy and credibility to common policies (Moravcsik & Schimmelfennig, 2009).

1.3.2. Constructivism

As argued by LI, a variety of approaches and theories are needed to understand the complexity of the EU and its functioning (Moravcsik, 1998). The constructivist school of thought offers a way of studying Member State interaction that is different from rational theories, emphasising the importance of norms, identity and cognitive factors. The central idea to constructivism is that many prime aspects of international relations are socially constructed (Wendt, 1999). Wendt (1999) identifies that structures of human association are primarily determined by shared

ideas rather than material forces, and that identities and interests are shaped by these shared ideas rather than given by nature, as the two increasingly accepted basic tenets of constructivism. Within constructivism, questions of identity, ideology, and discourse, as well as the cultural context in which power is exercised, are included in the realm of power relations.

Constructivists argue that a state can have multiple identities. These identities are socially constructed through interaction with other actors and are a representation of the state's interests. The interests and policy preferences of the Netherlands as an EU Member State are formed within its national boundaries but are shaped through interaction within EU institutions. According to constructivist reasoning, a set of interests of small states differ from those of large states as they are implied by their identities. Smaller states are arguably more focused on its survival insomuch as large states are concerned with a dominant position in the international system on political, economic, and military grounds (Theys, 2017). The constructivist approach includes dimensions of power, namely structural, and dimensions of power, which are then expressed through complex sets of social relations between nations as well as between nations and individuals (Wendt, 1999).

1.4. Research Outline

The dissertation consists of six chapters and will be structured as follows. Firstly, the introduction presents a rundown and background of the problem statement, relevancy, and theoretical framework used in our study. Secondly, in the state of the art, relevant existing scientific literature will be reviewed, providing a critical appraisal of previous studies related to the current research area. Based on the lessons learned in our literature review, we will formulate and present our central research question. Thirdly, we will introduce and discuss the methodology applied, explaining our methods of data collection and analysis. Fourthly, we will present and analyse our findings in relation to the research question. Subsequently, in the fifth section, the discussion part, we will critically evaluate our study and seek to trace and integrate the implications of our findings for policy and practice. Finally, we will present our conclusions, providing an answer to the research question of this dissertation, identifying its limitations and providing options for further research.

2 State of the Art

This chapter presents the state of the art of our research. We will review previous works produced and published in the area of coalition-building and cooperation in the EU context, in which the position of the Netherlands will be included. In order to structure the existing literature, this review is chronologically divided into three sections and will be based on various publications, looking critically at how they differ and what they have in common, in order to understand how our study may contribute to the debate. The first section will begin by laying out a brief historical overview of the relationship of the Netherlands with the EU and takes a look at the Dutch stance under Prime Minister Mark Rutte. In section 2.2 we analyse the theoretical framework of coalition-building in the EU context and analyse patterns of cooperation. This will be followed by the third section, in which we seek to trace and integrate the most recurring and structural EU coalition partners for the Netherlands. Finally, we will identify the key findings to emerge from this section as well as the limitations and shortcomings in existing literature. Based on these insights, we will formulate our research question and hypotheses.

2.1. The Netherlands as an EU Member State

This section includes a brief review of the literature regarding the Netherlands as an EU Member State. The post-war posture of the Netherlands toward regional economic and political integration ensured the state's place at the negotiation tables from the start with larger, more powerful, neighbours. The Netherlands is one of the six founding Member States of the EU. The organisation was originally created as the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) subsequent to World War II (WWII) and formally established by the Treaty of Paris in 1951 in order to regulate industrial production under a centralised authority.

There is a considerable body of literature on integration policies of the Netherlands towards the EU and its position as a Member State (Rood, 2009; Harryvan & van der Harst, 2017; Clingendael, 2019; Schout, 2018). We find that most literature has been either linked to or directly published by the Clingendael Netherlands Institute of International Relations, presumably as a result of being able to conduct research in the Dutch language and its existing wide range of knowledge on the Dutch government's policies.

2.1.1. Economic and Political Integration

Initial work in this field focused primarily on the EU policies of the Dutch governments and on the influence the Netherlands could exert as a member of the EU. There is a general consensus on the fact that the Netherlands has a strong pro-EU record. Rood (2009) holds that the Netherlands has always been in favour of European integration, albeit within certain limits. Accordingly, since WWII the Netherlands has been heeding its ambitions to play an active role on the international scene, in particular in matters such as peace and security and maintaining legal order (*ibid.*). This is supported by Hellema's (2009) findings. During the second half of the last century, Dutch governments strongly supported European integration. During this period, Dutch national interests and the interests of the European project matched almost seamlessly. Dutch governments constantly favoured the widening and deepening of broader economic integration, such as adopting a common regional currency as well as promoting an EU Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) (Hellema, 2009). During the 1950s, Dutch Minister of Foreign Affairs Johan Willem Beyen detected opportunities for greater cooperation between European nations and put further economic integration on the agenda with his Beyen Plan for a common market (European Commission, 2020).

Rood (2009) suggests that, as a smaller Member State, the Netherlands has a lasting fear of larger Member States, in particular France, breaking up a previously prevailing balance between 'big' and 'small'. Likewise, Schout and Wiersma (2013) hold that the Netherlands has been concerned about its own values being thwarted by French-type politics and the dominance of big countries. This is also sustained by the clear support of the Netherlands for the accession of the UK. Prior to 1973, the Netherlands had already positioned itself as the biggest ally of the Britons (as well as the Americans) and had been countering the 'continental' (i.e. French) desires of a separate political and military union (van Zanden, 1998). The accession of the UK was of great importance for the position of the Netherlands in the EU. Being a loyal member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) and the strong Atlantic bonds with the United States of America (US) and the UK since WWII also comprised an additional argument for the Dutch's commitment to the UK's accession to the European Economic Community (EEC) at the time.

However, discussions over the deepening of a political union have also been taking place since the 1960s and the Netherlands has been on the frontline trying to halt its development. Schout and Wiersma (2013) argue that the historically strong pro-EU Dutch position is a result of its open, international economy with strong trade links to its neighbours on the continent.

According to these authors, the image of the Netherlands as a frontrunner in EU integration is, however, somewhat mistaken. Dutch governments and diplomats have been pragmatic in fostering the internal market, including a monetary union, while avoiding political interference (ibid.). Schout and Wiersma (2013) cite the prospecting example of a transfer union, to the dismay of the ruling liberal party of Prime Minister Mark Rutte. Nearly all parties represented in the Dutch House of Representatives are reluctant to further transfers of money, economic contracts such as European debt mutualisation, and competences to the EU.

In a seminal investigation into the European integration policy by the Dutch government from 1945-2017, Harryvan and van der Harst (2017) maintain that the Netherlands has always perceived supranationalism in the form of supra-state decision-making not as an end (i.e. federalisation) in itself, but mainly as a means or instrument to promote Dutch interests (in particular trade interests) in western Europe. They furthermore describe the years between the drafting of the Single European Act (SEA) (1986) and the signing of the Maastricht Treaty (1992) as the most ‘Europhile’ ever, when looking at the Netherlands’ policies towards the EU (Harryvan & van der Harst, 2017).

2.1.2. The Increase of Dissonance

Over the course of the 1990s, as more European countries acceded to the EU, the policies of the Dutch governments became more reserved. The main reason for this can be found in an expanding EU, in which the Netherlands is no longer one of the six Member States, but one amongst many more – with all its consequences for the country’s visibility and influence in EU decision-making (Harryvan & van der Harst, 2017). This shift from Europhile to a more cautious EU narrative is much more pronounced, however, amongst political parties in the national parliament and in public opinion rather than in government circles. In a 2012 article, Schout and Wiersma trace the advances in the more cautious outspokenness over the EU back to the 1990s. The authors list several reasons for the falling apart of the broad political consensus regarding EU integration, including that the EU had become a scapegoat for whenever things would go wrong inasmuch as new populist politicians, such as Pim Fortuyn, folded EU affairs into attacks on the political elite (Schout & Wiersma, 2012).

Harryvan and van der Harst (2017) add a more specific party-based layer to this debate. A change of course over the Dutch EU narrative was first expressed by Thijs Wöltgens, the leader of the centre-left wing Labour Party (PvdA), and later, in 1991, adopted by the centre-right wing People’s Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD), advocating for a Union with limited

powers. The Netherlands had become the largest net contributor per capita of all EU Member States in 1992 and Minister of Finance Gerrit Zalm (VVD) set out a campaign to cut the EU budget, receiving moderate support from Austria, Denmark, France, Germany, Sweden, and the UK, but met with opposition from southern Member States. Nevertheless, at the Berlin Summit in March 1999, the government managed to reduce the Dutch EU contribution by more than 700 million euros (Harryvan & van der Harst, 2017).

Rood (2009) raises the question of whether the rejection of the European Constitution by means of a referendum in the Netherlands caused a fundamental change in its EU policy. The author concludes that there is more continuity in the Dutch position towards the EU than what it is at times assumed (Rood, 2009). More recent evidence equally finds that after the Dutch 'no' vote, the government supported and even initiated measures that led to 'more EU' (van Wilgen, 2016). Van Wilgen (2016) draws our attention to the rejection of the constitution as a turning point in Dutch EU policy as euroscepticism entered the political agenda. Harryvan and van der Harst underline that the Dutch 'no' vote made it clear that the Dutch population had started to see the European project as a moving train on its way to an unclear destination (Harryvan & van der Harst, 2013). The authors' assumptions seem to be well-founded as the Dutch public opinion regarding the EU has become increasingly wary over the years (European Commission, 2019).

Throughout the history of European integration, the Netherlands has always had a focus on economic integration rather than political integration. However, Dutch EU policy has become more restrained and critical over the years. This is primarily a result of the more prominent role assigned to self-interest whenever pursuing EU policies, as established by various authors (Rood, 2009; Harryvan & van der Harst, 2013; Schout & Wiersma, 2013; van Wilgen, 2016). For example, the Netherlands perceived the application of the community method² as the best instrument to protect the interests of smaller Member States (Rood, 2009). The work of Schout and Wiersma (2012) is helpful in understanding the Dutch view on the different institutions of the EU. The Dutch have a long tradition of supporting the European Commission's role as a 'guardian of the rules' with a focus on strong supranational supervision and law enforcement (Schout & Wiersma, 2012). The authors question, however, whether in a College of 28 Commissioners, the Netherlands still supports the concept of a single national representative or

² The community method is a decision-making procedure based on the interplay between three autonomous institutions: the European Commission, the European Parliament, and the Council of Ministers (also called the 'institutional triangle'), allowing for a transparent, effective and democratic functioning of the European Union.

whether the original Dutch preference for a small Commission still applies (Schout & Wiersma, 2013).

2.1.3. A Decade of Dutch Leadership by Prime Minister Mark Rutte

In 2010, Mark Rutte became Prime Minister of the Netherlands as the first Liberal to serve in this role since 1918. The party leader of the VVD is today one of the longest-serving heads of government in the EU and has been Prime Minister of the Netherlands in three different cabinet formations:³

Table 2.1. *Cabinet formations in the Netherlands 2010 – present*

Cabinet		Coalition
2010 – 2012	First Rutte Cabinet	Minority government VVD, CDA with parliamentary support PVV
2012 – 2017	Second Rutte Cabinet	VVD, PvdA
2017 – present	Third Rutte Cabinet	VVD, D66, CDA, CU

In Mark Rutte’s first term, the coalition relied on parliamentary support (from outside the coalition) of the Party for Freedom (PVV) led by Geert Wilders. Mark Rutte’s government fell after the PVV refused to sanction the austerity measures the government sought in April 2012. This called for new early elections in September 2012, which was an important moment in Dutch national elections as it was highly uncertain how the public would vote. The anti-EU PVV stated that the elections would revolve around opposition towards the EU. Ultimately, however, the Dutch voted for stability, including with regard to the EU (Schout & Wiersma, 2013). The VVD won the early general elections with 41 seats and formed a governing coalition with the social-democratic PvdA.

The tone of Dutch governments on the EU has undeniably changed in recent years. Rutte I offered a new instance of governmental Euroscepticism, making it clear that an unrestricted expansion of the EU was out of the question and that the transfer of ‘national competences’ to the European level had to be curtailed (Harryvan & van der Harst, 2017). The coalition

³ The House of Representatives (the Second Chamber) is the main Chamber of the bicameral parliamentary system of the Netherlands with its 150 seats. Elections are based on proportional representation, which allows small parties to be represented in parliament. Such fragmentation makes it nearly impossible for one party to win the 76 seats (75+1) needed for a majority. Therefore, in order to form a stable government, several parties have to cooperate in order to form a governing coalition. Since 1897 no party has had an absolute majority of seats in the lower chamber needed to govern alone, and all Dutch cabinets have since then consisted of a coalition of at least two parties in which left- and right-wing parties often governed together.

agreement sustaining his government identified subsidiarity as a crucial principle, asserting that what can be better regulated at the Member State level should not be decided at the EU level, and that the EU should limit itself to the core tasks of prosperity, freedom, and security. Furthermore, the new cabinet would continue to work for a substantial reduction in the payments by the Netherlands to the EU (VVD & CDA, 2010).

Under Rutte II, the discourse changed as the government no longer relied on the support of the Eurosceptic PVV. The more positive aspects towards the EU (welfare, security, and freedom) were therefore emphasised in the coalition agreement with the social democrats (PvdA). Rather than a threat, the EU seemed to be an important instrument to best serve Dutch interests (Harryvan & van der Harst, 2017). Prime Minister Rutte's view regarding the EU plays an explicit role both politically as well as for the public opinion in the Netherlands.

Overall, over the past decade of leadership under Rutte, a large single market, combatting terrorism, as well as the migration issue and the creation of jobs through a genuine internal market seem to best encompass the view of the Dutch government for the EU (Harryvan & van der Harst, 2017). However, as argued by Schout and Wiersma, during the Rutte era, the debates on the EU are actually marked by an absence of a clear stance towards the EU. Accordingly, Dutch politicians have expressed little clearness over the desired direction to be taken in respect of the EU (Schout & Wiersma, 2013).

Mark Rutte has often avoided discussing his vision for European integration. Although he has always stressed the importance of the Netherlands' membership as a trading nation and refuted ideas of populist left- and right-wing parties to withdraw from the EU, his public policy interests did not often reach beyond the first of the classic policy certainties: a large single market (Alonso, 2016). One question our dissertation seeks to answer is if that was altered once the UK withdrew from the EU.

When looking at the public opinion in the Netherlands regarding the EU in 2019, 43% said that the EU in general evoked a positive image. On the other hand, a fifth of the Dutch inquired (22%) indicated that the EU evoked a negative image in them and 35% were neutral. This is comparable to an EU-28 average in 2019 (42% positive; 20% negative; 37% neutral; EU-27: 43% positive; 18% negative; 38% neutral). The share of Dutch people with a negative image of the EU has increased compared to the previous year (autumn 2018: 16%). The Dutch also seemed slightly more pessimistic about the future of the EU in 2019 (34%) than in the previous year (autumn 2018: 30%) (European Commission, 2019).

The Dutch citizens' scepticism toward the EU was articulated, for example, by rejecting the Ukraine-EU Association Agreement in a referendum in 2016,⁴ as a result of widespread corruption in Ukraine and a fear that the country would become a member of the EU (Rrustemi & Jovetic, 2019). The role of the Netherlands in EU enlargement processes comprises another front. Rrustemi and Jovetic (2019) concluded that, despite legitimate concerns, the Netherlands is among the key representatives of a trend of enlargement scepticism. According to the authors, the Netherlands often delayed enlargement processes in the past. Recent examples include the rejection of opening accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia (Rrustemi & Jovetic, 2019). The findings of the Advisory Council on International Affairs appear to partly support these conclusions. Although the Netherlands was strongly in favour of EU enlargement in 2004, it seems to now be wary of the accession of countries that do not meet all the requirements (i.e. western Balkans) (AIV, 2018).

Over the past decade, EU enlargement has accentuated the importance of forming coalitions. Within the EU, a Member State can only exert influence on the final decision-making process if it succeeds in encountering and mobilising a sufficient number of peers that support its views (Rood, 2009). Tentative research already shows that, much like its approach towards the EU in general, the Dutch commitment to coalition formation within the EU is highly pragmatic in nature (van der Bij & Rood, 2016). However, how and where in the EU are such coalitions formed? The following section reviews the literature on cooperation in the EU context.

2.2. Coalition-Building in the EU: Forms of Structural Cooperation

Our understanding of coalitions is based on Rasch's definition (1997) as a "*set of actors that coordinate their behaviour in order to reach goals they have agreed upon*" (Rasch, 1997 apud. Elgström et al., 2001, p. 113). Elgström (2001) provides a conceptual framework regarding coalitions, formulating that these can be, on the one hand, broad or specific to a certain issue, and, on the other hand, short in range or more durable. Additionally, a key aspect to coalitions is that they scale down complexity and facilitate debate (Elgström et al, 2001). Coalition-building in the Council of the European Union can therefore be regarded in view of classical

⁴ The Ukraine–European Union Association Agreement referendum held in the Netherlands on 6 April 2016 concerned the approval of the Association Agreement between the EU and Ukraine. The referendum question was: "*Are you for or against the Approval Act of the Association Agreement between the European Union and Ukraine?*" with 61% of the votes cast against.

coalition theory, suggesting that Member States reach out to partners either for motives of power-pooling through minimum winning coalitions or they seek to influence decision-making and thus strive for allies with similar preferences. Ruse (2013) adds the secretive nature of negotiations to the classic theory debate and highlights that EU coalitions are a consequence of the restricted nature of the decision-making process in the Council of the European Union (Ruse, 2013, p. 44).

Building coalitions is a fundamental practice within the EU. European integration has been shaped by coalition structures since its inception, following historical patterns (van der Bij & Rood, 2016). But despite its importance, scholarly understanding of Council operations is still not well documented. Empirical analyses of preference patterns in the Council is limited (Kaeding & Selck, 2005). Existing research focuses primarily on voting-power indices, suggesting that, as a result of their strong overall influence, the interests of the largest Member States likely played a central role in the overall integration process (Hosli, 1996). Van der Bij & Rood (2016) elaborate on this point and state that large Member States, with Germany and France at the forefront, occupy a prominent place within the field of coalition formations, arguing that a successful coalition would barely be possible without their support.

This is underlined by Janning and Möller (2014), who recognise that the Franco-German entente stood at the core of the EEC. They furthermore stress the importance of Member States in European policy-making process, conforming to our LI framework. Hence, interaction of Member States is crucial in European governance inasmuch as coalitions of engaged and ambitious Member States to influence EU policy making are a result of consensus and compromise. In other words, “adaption and reforming the EU would hardly be possible without a coalition of ‘builders’” (Janning and Möller 2014, p. 3).

In order to understand the purpose of coalitions, we first explore the decision-making process of the EU. The Council of the European Union is the central constituent in the EU’s working procedure and arguably the most powerful of the institutions involved in the EU’s day-to-day decision-making process. It constitutes the primary arena in which negotiations among governments take place and, respectively, counts a representative from each Member State (Naurin & Wallace, 2008). This is the institution where Brexit is most likely to have a clear impact on its relations. Here, Member State governments influence decision-making, introduce initiatives and form the institutional setting of the EU. Member States act as co-legislature, and guide the European Commission’s work through the many consultative processes of comitology (Janning & Möller, 2014, p. 5). Together with the European Parliament (EP), the Council deals

with budget and legislation. We will explore how voting on these proposals is carried out in the Council in order to determine the impact of Brexit on power relations in the EU.

The Council counts over 150 working parties and committees, comprised of officials from all the Member States, assisting in the preparation of the work of ministers examining proposals in differing Council configurations. The proposals pass through working parties, the Permanent Representatives Committee (Coreper) and the Council configuration, ensuring the proposal's technical scrutiny as well as responsibility at ministerial level. The Council maintains three different voting procedures: in rare cases, a simple majority is enough and occasionally unanimity is needed. However, more often than not a different voting system applies, that of qualified majority voting (QMV). In the current configuration of EU members, a qualified majority is reached if 55% of Member States vote in favour (which means 15 out of 27) and the proposal is supported by Member States representing at least 65% of the EU population. Conceivably, representation of 65% of the EU population is more feasible to obtain upon the backing of one large Member States than several small ones. A so-called blocking minority can be achieved by 13 Member States voting against or four Member States representing 35% of the EU's population (European Union, 2020).

The coalition landscape also evolved over the years. Hosli (1996) stresses that the introduction of QMV in the Council changed the negotiation behaviour of Member States. In the past, the 1966 Luxembourg compromise – which resolved the ‘empty chair crisis’⁵ – stipulated that if a Member State considered its vital national interests to be adversely affected, negotiations had to proceed until a universally agreeable accord was attained (CVCE.EU, 2020). In practice, a counter-vote of a single Member State was sufficient to block any proposal. In contrast, qualified majority votes require the formation of a ‘blocking minority’ to achieve a similar effect (Hosli, 1996, p. 258). Since the Luxembourg compromise decreased in relevance, qualified majority voting has increasingly become the dominant decision rule within the Council. Hosli holds that Member State divergent preferences have influenced EU decision-making. In the case of the SEA, for instance, southern Member States and Ireland resorted to a simple majority rule within the Council of the EU; Denmark and the UK, in contrast, favoured the unanimity rule in order to protect the sovereignty of Member States. However, France and Germany, alongside the Benelux countries, advocated for the option of qualified majority

⁵ The crisis consisted in a period of non-participation from France in the EEC's institutions from July 1965 and January 1966, which was only resolved through the Luxembourg compromise.

voting with respect to single market issues, which was subsequently adopted in the final treaty text of the SEA (Hosli, 1996).

The aforementioned report by Janning and Möller (2014) adds another layer to this debate. Correspondingly, the enlargement from 15 to 25 Member States in less than a decade, has induced far more ad-hoc interaction alongside a more national approach among national governments. Furthermore, veto-action by large Member States has incremented (Janning & Möller, 2014). Hosli's conceptions demonstrate how various Member States reacted to these developments in the Council. France and Germany favoured a weighting of votes proportionate to economic power as opposed to population size (Hosli, 1996, p. 258: note 11). The UK was reluctant, likely as a result of a potential decrease in sovereignty, while Spain opposed as a consequence to the accession of Austria, Finland, and Sweden (1995), causing a shift in balance in the north-south divide and richer and less affluent Member States (Hosli, 1996).

Janning and Möller (2014), however, contend that the Lisbon effect,⁶ unprecedented diversity, and broken traditions are presently the three major developments constraining Member State interaction. Other scholars, e.g. Elgström et al. (2001), similarly stress the importance of forming coalitions in EU decision-making by providing an institutional analysis. Elgström et al. argue that coalition patterns are surprisingly fixed. Their research observed that, in the vast majority of committees studied, a north-south division translated into the coming about of a Nordic-British axis, at times met by Dutch and German participation (Elgström et al., 2001). Elgström et al. underline that coalitions occur more frequently when majority voting occurs than when unanimity applies. However, even though their work focuses on fixed coalition patterns (ibid.), it does not address various theme-specific coalitions nor does it address the leading role for Germany, unlike other authors (Janning & Möller, 2014; van der Bij & Rood, 2016).

Numerous attempts have been made to classify the determinants of coalition behaviour. Veen (2011) distinguishes between coalitions at the bargaining- and voting stages of decision-making in the Council, asserting that, even though related, both stages present diverging patterns of coalition behaviour. The bargaining stage regulates the eventual policy output and the voting stage is a public arena where governments can exhibit disagreement in consideration of strategic motives (Veen, 2011). Discrepancy between net-contributors and net-beneficiaries shape coalitions. Hence, alignments emerge along groups of Member States with divergent

⁶ The Lisbon Treaty upgraded the European Council of heads of state and government to a formal EU institution. The European Council has, since then, taken on an ever more active role (Janning & Möller, 2014).

stances towards subsidies and redistributive policies (Zimmer, Schneider, & Dobbins, 2005). Coalitions exist in many different political contexts and one heavily discussed institutional aspect about the frequency and functions of coalitions in the EU is the above specified voting rules (Elgström et al., 2001). Additional literature has presented interesting controversies, including the stability of alignments. On the one hand, it is argued that the lack of structure in the positions that governments take in Council decision-making comprise the most important finding (Thomson, Boerefijn, & Stokman, 2004, p. 257), whereas on the other hand, it is alleged that “there might be more structure to the interactions than the ideal picture foresaw” (Naurin & Wallace, 2008, p. 64).

A useful manner of categorising coalitions is by distinguishing between temporary (or ad-hoc) coalitions and permanent alliances. Ad-hoc alliances are short term and focus on specific issues. Kaeding and Selck (2005) contend that Member States communicate their similar interest to each other in a particular dossier and, therefore, predict shifting coalitions. Permanent coalitions, in contrast, are more stable and institutionally embedded. Factors that often play an important role here are, for instance, geography, language or shared cultural interests (Ruse, 2013). Repetition of coalition patterns in different issue areas are expected when coalitions are driven by ideology. However, these may also shift and change over time as political regimes in Member States change (Kaeding & Selck, 2005).

Table 2.2. addresses the issue of whether or not, and to which extent, structural partnerships play a role within the described negotiation dynamics, distinguishing between theme-specific and territorial coalitions, on the one hand, and ad-hoc and permanent coalitions, on the other hand. Ad-hoc coalitions focus on specific matters and may be founded on underlying collaboration built on party political affinities between governments. A current example of this is Denmark, Ireland, and the Netherlands who occasionally cooperated during the Brexit negotiations as Member States with economies that will be relatively heavily affected by the departure of the UK. These loose-knit coalitions end when the concerned issue has been dealt with and are not institutionalised. In this way, they are different from theme-based coalitions, which are also not permanently active as a group, but collaborate systematically on specific dossiers on the agenda.

Ruse (2013) defines structural territorial and theme-specific coalitions primarily on the basis of the degree of institutionalisation and shared background of coalition partners, as conveyed by the horizontal axis in table 2.2. The degree of institutionalisation can be measured by regular, recurring consultations between countries. Moreover, if a group bears a specific name, this indicates external recognition. In addition, highly institutionalised coalitions have

more formalised structures and procedures, which are expressed, for example, in shared institutions, joint representation in the Council and regular drafting of joint non-papers or a shared agenda. Secondly, a structural partnership is characterised by the shared background of coalition partners, in which equality based on culture, geographical location, ideology or shared interests is paramount. However, cooperation between like-minded Member States does not automatically lead to equal voting behaviour in the Council (van der Bij & Rood, 2016).

Table 2.2. *Forms of coalitions in the EU*

Coalitions		Institutionalisation: Stability and frequency of cooperation	Shared background: interests, ideology, culture, geographical location	Other features
Ad-hoc coalitions		Short term, instable	Like-minded on specific issues	Cooperation ends when the file on the specific issue has been settled
Structural coalitions	Territorial coalitions	- Fixed, stable - Regularly scheduled meetings, formalised structures and procedure	Geographical location, cultural relationship	Cooperation on various issues possible. Stable in the sphere of political space.
	Theme- specific coalitions	- Fixed, stable when specific dossier on the agenda - Scheduled meetings if required, less formal structures and procedures	Like-minded in specific policy areas	Cooperation in certain policy areas with like-minded actors. Can be activated if a specific file is on the agenda.

(Ruse, 2013, pp. 85-86)

As previously mentioned, various authors specify that the unique geopolitical ties between France and Germany have been at the forefront of the EU's coalition building process since WWII (Janning & Möller, 2014; van der Bij & Rood, 2016). The two large European states carried out an advanced degree of economic and industrial interdependence and, therewith, laid the basis for European integration (AIV, 2018, p. 14). According to the German Federal Foreign Office, Franco-German relations hold a "particularly prominent position because of its history, intensity and special institutional architecture" (Auswärtiges Amt, 2020). The Franco-German alliance is founded more on a similar political attitude to go beyond the pre-1945 antagonism and rivalry and less on a shared culture or identity. However, Jürgens (2018) argues that, nowadays, little remains of the united French-German forces set up to start the renewal process within the EU. Even though the two states have certainly grown closer during the 21st century, differences in starting points remain large.

There is an overall tendency towards thinking that the role of Germany is dominant in the EU decision-making and the coalition game. Van der Bij and Rood (2016) and Janning and Möller (2014) have emphasised the pivotal role of Germany to the EU integration process. A survey by the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR) reveals that all political elites across EU Member States perceive Germany as the most influential member, including in Member State interaction. This perception prevails in Germany as well (Janning, 2015). The work of van der Bij and Rood (2016) is very helpful in understanding the leadership position that Germany has grown into in recent years as a consequence of its population size (and hence, voting weight), economic power, and relations with large neighbour France. Hosli (1996) also elaborates that, in the past, decisions were virtually never taken opposing the alliance of Germany and France, thus recognising the crucial role of the former. In quantitative terms, this would signify that the two large states combined share for all purposes an informal veto power (Hosli, 1996).

Hitherto, we have explored the coalition-landscape in the EU and learned that there is no fixed dividing line where the same (groups of) Member States consistently face each other on a broad set of dossiers. In practice, the composition of coalitions varies from file to file and is, therefore, theme-specific. This means that Member States move about in different groups, depending on the subject. There are no rigid driving lines, but rather a set of fluid patterns. The practice of coalition formation within the EU is a game of changing coalitions where “the issue defines the coalition” (van der Bij & Rood, 2016, p. 13). Notwithstanding, fluid partnerships do not exclude the formation of structural coalitions along territorial lines. Daily practices demonstrate that groups of Member States indeed collaborate structurally in order to exert more influence on the European decision-making process. The following section will explore the position of the Netherlands within EU coalition formations.

2.3. Positioning of the Netherlands in EU Decision-Making Coalitions

The Franco-German axis, which stood at the core of the EEC, reinforced an apparent, but otherwise unlikely coalition of the three Benelux states. This had become conspicuous when, following the first northern expansion, the EU policies supported by the Netherlands were bolstered by two very like-minded states, namely Denmark and the UK (Janning & Möller, 2014). Over the years, however, the Netherlands started to advocate different attitudes than their traditional geographical alliances with Belgium and Luxembourg (Hosli, 1996, p. 259). The difficult functioning of a Benelux political partnership in this respect lies primarily with

opposing views between, on one side, the Netherlands, and on the other, Belgium (and Luxembourg), on numerous European dossiers.

As mentioned in the previous section, this begins with the overall orientation towards the EU. Belgium favours a federal deepening of the EU whereas the Netherlands is more cautious towards it. Moreover, on issues involving the Euro, in particular macroeconomic cooperation, the European budget, agriculture and social matters, the countries often appear to be out of alignment. Unity, however, is still found in the fields of foreign policy and judicial matters (van der Bij & Rood, 2016).

The actions of the Netherlands as an actor in international relations are significant enough to influence state-to-state relations or the behaviour of other actors in the international system (Sekiguchi, 2009). The *State of the European Union*⁷ of 2019 states that formations of coalitions have been part of the Dutch diplomatic style since the Peace of Münster in 1648: “it has always been necessary for our country to look for coalitions to safeguard our own interests” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2019, p. 53).

The Policy and Operations Evaluation Department (IOB, by its acronym in Dutch) of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands establishes that the country’s choice of partners is primarily determined by the degree of thematic like-mindedness, in which a special position is assigned to Germany as the most important large Member State. This evaluative report reveals that a multi-bi approach – primarily aimed at optimising influence within theme-specific, changing, coalitions – has been a characteristic of Dutch EU policy since Minister of Foreign Affairs Jozias van Aartsen (1998-2002) abandoned the ‘neighbouring countries policy’ of his predecessor van Mierlo (1994-1998) (IOB, 2014). The neighbourhood policy entailed that the Netherlands was trying to build a ring of privileged neighbouring partners, consisting of France, Germany, and the Benelux countries. By contrast, the multi-bi approach put bilateral relations in service of multilateral cooperation. Shifting coalitions required maintaining and furthering good relations with all Member States on the basis of issue-base coalitions, deepening bilateral relations with large like-minded Member States and amplifying the focus on bilateral channels as a means of influencing EU decision-making processes (ibid.).

With the expansion of the EU in the backdrop, van Aartsen opted for a different course, ingraining the Dutch interest as a central focus. From then on, the priority fell on coalitions for each policy area with like-minded Member States, with whom views and interests were shared.

⁷ An annual report in which the Dutch Cabinet looks back at the most important developments in the EU of the past year and presents a vision of the EU and EU agenda for the coming year.

This resulted in looser partnerships with neighbouring Member States and a strengthening of the so-called multi-bi approach. These bilateral contacts take place via embassies, visits from ministers and senior officials, strategic secondments, and bilateral conferences, mainly with the large Member States: Germany, France, the UK, and Poland (van der Bij & Rood, 2016).

By exchanging positions at a bilateral level, the Netherlands responded to the growing importance of informal contacts in the preliminary phase of the European decision-making process. When exploring the significance of the Dutch multi-bi approach to today's EU, maintaining good relations with all Member States remains the basic principle, as opposed to furthering relations with a select group. However, given the current number of EU Member States, intensive contact with every single Member State lies beyond the bounds of possibility. Hence, the Netherlands is invariably forced to differentiate between the Member States.

Within this practice of Member State interaction, the Netherlands is a relatively active player in the field of theme-specific coalitions and a prime example of the power of smaller states in the EU. The Netherlands punches above its economic or demographic weight, despite its reluctance towards deepening integration. Ranking sixth in largest economies of the EU and eight population size-wise, the Dutch come in fourth out of 28 (EU+UK) with regard to relevance as measured by the ECFR's EU Coalition Explorer, only behind Germany, France, and Italy (Janning, 2019).

Additionally, another study by the ECFR covers the preferences in working with other EU Member States. This study demonstrated that the Netherlands is seen as the most influential of the affluent smaller Member States (Sweden, Austria, and Ireland among others). More than half of respondents rank the country as the most influential of the seven, and more than 75% rank it either first or second (ECFR, 2018).

Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the often-aligned views and shared interest as well as its weight within the EU, Germany occupies a special position for the Netherlands. Research shows that this is reciprocal (Janning, 2015). The Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs notes that the Netherlands has been playing an active role in forming, mobilising, and using coalitions and that it occasionally chooses different partners on the basis of a tactical assessment. Furthermore, it emphasises that coalitions were most clearly successful when the Netherlands took the initiative (IOB, 2014, pp. 7-8).

Research also suggests that the Netherlands is strongly focused on northern European Member States in terms of structural and recurring coalition partners. Member States with which the Netherlands cooperates on a regular basis, include primarily Germany, Denmark, Finland, Sweden, the UK, and to a slight lesser extent Austria, Belgium, Czech Republic,

Ireland, Lithuania, Latvia, Poland, and Slovakia (van der Bij & Rood, 2016, p. 40). A Clingendael report conveys that the Netherlands is considered to be part of the following coalitions within the EU context (Clingendael, 2019).

Table 2.3. *Coalitions in which the Netherlands partakes*

Coalition	Coalition partners	Remarks
The Net Contributors Group	AT, DE, LU, SE, UK (BE, DK, FR)	On average highest contributors to the European budget.
The Hardliners	DE, FI	Budgetary discipline, debt reduction and the need for structural reforms.
The Copenhagen Group	CZ, DK, EE, IE, LT, SE, UK	Applies in particular to the theme of market liberalisation.
The Northern Lights Group	DE, DK, EE, FI, SE, UK	Alliance of northern European Member States that regularly cooperate on a broadly coherent package of dossiers.
The Eurogroup	Member States holding the euro as their currency	Finance ministers meet regularly on the day prior to the Economic and Financial Affairs Council.
Trade Policy	CZ, DE, DK, EE, FI, SE UK	Group of Member States promoting free trade, acting as a counterbalance to more protectionist-minded (southern) countries.
Development Cooperation	DE, FI, SE, UK (AT, DE, IE)	Institutionalised in the Council Working Party on Development Cooperation and breakfast sessions of international development ministers before their six-monthly Council meetings (AIV, 2018).
Better Law and Regulation	CZ, DK, EE, LT, LT, PL, SE, SK, UK	Supporting efforts concerning better regulation in the EU. Heads of government and ministers of economic affairs have sent joint letters to the EC and the European Council on several occasions in order to keep this issue high on the political agenda (AIV, 2018).
Agricultural Policy	DE, DK, DE, SE	Coalition aimed at modernising and simplifying the policy. Policy officers meet every four months.
Affluent Seven	AT, BE, DK, FI, LU, SE	This group has relatively large economic influence on the EU. Each of the seven countries has an employment ratio of at least 10 to 1. The disposable income per capita of the group is considerably above the average of both the EU and the Big Six (ECFR, 2018).

(Clingendael, 2019)

8 The formation of all these coalitions predate Brexit, hence why the UK still figures in their midst.

Drawing from the coalition patterns in the previous section, we will map two examples of coalitions that the Netherlands partakes in, based on geographical proximity as well as on political, cultural, identity and/or historical alignment. These examples include:

- *Benelux Political Cooperation*

The alliance consisting of the Netherlands, Belgium, and Luxembourg (or ‘Benelux’ by its acronym) is one of the oldest examples of a territorial coalition in the EU. The TFEU⁹ even makes a specific provision for the Benelux stating that the regional union is allowed to work closely together to the extent that ‘the objectives of these regional unions are not attained by application of the Treaties’ (Art. 350, TFEU). Historically the three neighbouring states acted as precursors for initiatives – that were later implemented at a broader EU level – on a regular basis, including the single market and police cooperation. This grants Benelux a particularly authoritative role in present-day EU. It is worth recalling, however, that at the time of the writing of this dissertation the geopolitical ideas of the group over EU policy diverge. An illustration of this is the fact that Belgium, for instance, supports further federalisation of the EU, whereas the Netherlands tends to be more cautious towards this matter (AIV, 2018).

- *The Old-Six*

Out of the six founding states of what is known as the EU today (Belgium, Germany, France, Italy, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands) the Netherlands has, in recent years, grown to be the most critical regarding deepening of European integration. However, the election of the *Five Star Movement* and the *Lega Nord per l’Indipendenza della Padania* has induced Italy to become far more critical as well. The founding members that created the European Coal and Steel Community do not meet systematically; however, they do tend to feel a shared responsibility for the EU and its future (AIV, 2018). That was visible from the meeting that took place two days after the Brexit referendum, when the ministers of foreign affairs of the old-six assembled to push in favour of no other Member State being able to follow the British in their decision to withdraw from the EU (ANP, 2016).

Structural theme-specific coalitions can arise from regular cooperation in a certain policy area or a broader coherent package of dossiers. Such structural coalitions distinguish themselves

⁹ Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, forms the foundation of the EU and provides the organisational and functional details.

from pure ad-hoc cooperation through their greater continuity. Member States seek to influence the decision-making process by collaborating structurally on certain subjects (van der Bij & Rood, 2016). In order to illustrate the divergence from the aforementioned territorial coalitions, we will now take a look at several examples of theme-based coalitions that the Netherlands partakes in, bringing together like-minded Member States on specific policy issues and areas, regardless of geographical proximity.

- *Net contributors*

The most well-known and constant structural theme-specific coalition is comprised of Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Germany, France, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Sweden, and the UK, and is united based on their on average highest contribution to the European budget (CBS, 2016). The net contributors take a combined stance on issues with respect to the EU budget, concentrating on reducing their net contribution and disseminating contributions more equally (AIV, 2018).

- *The Copenhagen Group*

This loose-knit group of Member States promote free trade and act as a counterbalance to more protectionist (southern) countries. Members range from east (Estonia) via central (Czech Republic) to west (Ireland) and include primarily north-western European Member States, including the Netherlands and the UK (AIV, 2018).

- *Agricultural policy*

Denmark, Germany, Estonia, the Netherlands, and Sweden form a loose coalition based on shared similar viewpoints on the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) seeking to modernise and simplify and modernise the policy, meeting every four months (DNG, 2011).

- *Frugal Four*

Austria, Denmark, the Netherlands, and Sweden, dubbed ‘the Frugal Four’, hold similar viewpoints regarding the EU’s long-term budget. Germany has occasionally been associated with these four, but is expected to be more flexible as the Multiannual Financial Framework’s (MFF) largest net contributor. In a letter advocating for a responsible EU budget, leading up to the EU summit of July 2020 where, among others, the long-term EU budget (2021-2027) was discussed, the Chancellor of Austria and prime ministers of the other three *Frugals* set forth that they intended the budget to remain at 1 per cent of EU gross national income (GNI), as

well as for the system of rebates, permanent corrections to protect individual states from excessive budgetary contributions, to remain in place (Kurz, 2020). An EU coalition holding opposing views to the Frugal Four are the ‘Friends of Cohesion’.¹⁰

A Clingendael survey concluded that Dutch pragmatism is perceived as valuable and that it clearly communicates positions and interests. However, a more direct approach could complicate the coalition building process (Clingendael, 2019). The survey also discloses that the Netherlands is seen by EU counterparts as constructive, assertive, and knowledgeable, as it presents new ideas and takes a leadership role. These findings relate to the operational process of coalition formation, not to the substantive input of the Netherlands in the policy-making process. Interestingly, even though Dutch experts indicate that the Netherlands functions as a ‘bridge builder’, experts from other Member States do not necessarily agree with that view.

The report states that the state is rarely perceived by non-Dutch as a country that initiates compromises within the EU, but rather one that prefers establishing blocking minorities. Hence, there is a contradiction between the Dutch polder model in internal affairs and its more rigid attitude within the EU. Moreover, the opinions of foreign experts are divided as to whether the Netherlands is selfish when forming coalitions, or whether it is a ‘power broker’ (ibid.). The various theme-specific coalitions mapped out in section 1 and in this section have shown that the UK takes part in many of the coalitions in which the Netherlands also engages.

2.4. Chapter Conclusion

This literature review identified the position of the Netherlands as an EU Member State, the theoretical framework concerning structural cooperation patterns in the EU as well as the role of the Netherlands in the EU’s current political coalition landscape. As an open economy with strong trade links to its European neighbours, the Netherlands has historically been a strong pro-EU Member State. However, Dutch positions on the EU have been mostly dictated by economic interests, with its government and diplomats being more pragmatic in fostering the internal market in terms of policy and institutions and countering further deepening of political integration.

¹⁰ Members of the large theme-specific coalition (BG, CY, CZ, EE, EL, HR, LT, LV, MT, PL, PT, RO, SI, and SK) are perceived as the net beneficiaries considering the EU budget, getting more from the MFF than they put in as a result of cohesion funds (Friends of Cohesion, 2020).

Since the 2007 Lisbon Treaty, the expansion of policy areas decided through QMV increased the importance of forming coalitions. In the literature, several theories have been proposed to explain patterns of structural cooperation. Distinguishable forms of structural cooperation can be successfully established, as described by Ruse (2013), Van der Bij & Rood (2016), and AIV (2018). Coalitions can be categorised as temporary/ad-hoc and permanent alliances. Where territorial coalitions share geographical, political and cultural proximity, theme-based coalitions are less institutionally embedded and unite like-minded Member States regarding specific issues.

Regarding this premise of the role of the Netherlands in structural cooperation, seminal contributions have been made by the IOB. For one, the EU strategy of the Netherlands changed from a neighbouring country policy to maximising influence within theme-specific, changing coalitions. The ECFR's Coalition Explorer also indicated that the Netherlands is an active player in the field of theme-specific coalitions and a prime example of the power of smaller states in the EU. Finally, the literature pertaining to coalitions in which the Netherlands partakes in the EU context strongly suggest that the Netherlands is steadily focused on northern European Member States.

Based on these insights, we will formulate our research question and introduce the hypotheses in the following section.

2.5. Research Question and Hypotheses

The central research question to this dissertation reads as follows:

- How has Brexit altered the position of the Netherlands towards EU coalition formations in the Council of the European Union during the pre-Brexit phase?

In order to properly address this question, however, the literature review in itself does not suffice. Drawing from the gathered literature, we can generate the following hypotheses and construct a research framework.

Hypothesis 1:

- There has been a shift in the Netherlands' EU narrative during the pre-Brexit phase, and its vision for the (future of the) EU has been put forward more explicitly.

Hypothesis 2:

- The Netherlands assumed a leadership role in forming alliances with other Member States during the pre-Brexit phase to compensate for the absence of the UK's substantial voting power.

Hypothesis 3:

- In order to defend against pressure for higher subsidies and more regulations of the common market, the Netherlands reached out to allies during the pre-Brexit phase that consist of other smaller and medium-sized northern EU Member States.

Possible alterations in the position of the Netherlands in the Council of the European Union during the pre-Brexit phase will be examined in its EU policy discourse as well as in its role in coalition formations. We expect Brexit to have prompted a great deal of political movement for the Netherlands. Contrary to enthusiasm for an EU departure of the Netherlands, we expect the Netherlands to demonstrate a desire of exploring new ways together. We furthermore expect the Netherlands to actively form new coalitions during the pre-Brexit phase, causing a shift in EU power relations. This will be validated or refuted by means of a document analysis of both primary and secondary sources. Data will be comprised of, among others, official government statements, speeches by Prime Minister Mark Rutte as well as his official agenda, Dutch and international newspaper articles, and scientific publications. This research aims for methodological triangulation in which data gathering methods of document analysis and discourse analysis will be complimented with semi-structured open-ended questionnaires. The following chapter justifies our methods of data collection and analysis in greater detail.

3 Methodology

The overall purpose of this study is to investigate if and to which extent the position of the Netherlands regarding EU coalition formations has altered during the pre-Brexit phase. In this chapter we will discuss our research design, data collection, data analysis and, finally, identify its shortcomings.

3.1. Methods of Analysis and Data Collection

In social and political sciences, the discussion as to whether qualitative or quantitative methods are more valid is recurrent. Qualitative research, which could be defined as “any kind of research that produces findings not arrived by means of statistical procedures or other means of quantification” (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 17), was used in our study. The Kingdom of the Netherlands provided the case for our analysis, specifically with regard to its position as a Member State in the Council of the European Union, amid the pre-Brexit period from 23 June 2016 (UK Brexit referendum) to 31 January 2020 (formal UK exit from the EU). Qualitative research stood out as a suitable method for this dissertation as documents of all types had the potential to help us uncover meaning, develop understanding, and discover insights about the proposed topic. It allows for a postpositivist methodological strategy like triangulation. Although qualitative research is inherently multimethod in focus, the use of multiple methods reflects an attempt to ensure an in-depth understanding of the discussed phenomenon (Denzin, 2015).

3.2. Triangulation

Combining methodologies in the study of the same phenomenon allows for the possibility of corroborating findings across data sets and, therewith, reduce potential biases that single studies might contain (Bowen, 2009). The employment of more than one method in the development of measures would result in greater confidence in findings (Bryman, 2012).

Denzin (2015), distinguished four basic types of triangulation: data triangulation, involving time, space and persons; investigator triangulation, consisting of using multiple observers; theory triangulation, consisting of the use of more theoretical schemes in the interpretation of a phenomenon, and methodological triangulation, involving the use of more than one research method (Denzin, 2015). Our research used methodological triangulation with three qualitative

methodologies, namely: document analysis; discourse analysis, and semi-structured open-ended questionnaires.

3.3. Document Analysis

The prime methodology to be applied in this dissertation is a systematic procedure for reviewing or evaluating documents, termed document analysis. The overall concept of document analysis as a research method can be described as ‘evaluating documents in such a way that empirical knowledge is produced and understanding is developed’ (Bowen, 2009, p. 33). As typically done in document analyses, we reviewed prior literature as part of our study and will incorporate the information in our analysis. In the literature review, we provided a historical background of the Netherlands as a Member State in the EU and identified the main debates and gaps in academia, looking critically at how they differ and what they had in common. There are several advantages to the use of document analysis as a research method, such as efficiency, availability and cost-effectiveness. Furthermore, document analysis can provide background information and broad coverage of data, to assist in the contextualisation of one’s research within its field. Documents are stable data sources as they can be read multiple times and remain unchanged (Bowen, 2009).

3.3.1. Sampling

For this particular dissertation, we chose document analysis based on purposive selection because it provides the opportunity to easily access and analyse a variety of data collected by professionals. That same data would be nearly impossible to obtain with other research methods. These types of documents include both primary and secondary sources. Examples include government statements and non-papers, as well as long-term studies prepared by institutions, such as the Advisory Council on International Relations (AIV, 2018). Other primary sources include studies by Clingendael, the Netherlands Institute of International Relations.

Moreover, with respect to secondary sources, we consulted scientific publications to measure the economic exposure of Brexit for the Netherlands (Chen et al., 2018) and the policy impact in the Council of the European Union after Brexit (Huhe et al., 2017), as well as studies and publications by the Swedish Institute for European Policy Studies (SIEPS), Carnegie, and the Organisation of Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). Lastly, we consulted several news articles, which contributed to the multiperspectivity of our analysis. A variety of

news articles were obtained from newspapers that frequently quote and consult experts and report on IR-related fields and EU affairs, including *Politico*, *The Economist* and the *Financial Times*.

3.4. Discourse Analysis

On a smaller scale, though not less important, this study also adopted the method of discourse analysis. We focused on the analysis of political discourse which can refer to a “text of politicians within overtly political contexts, or to a political, i.e., critical, approach to discourse analysis” (Dunmire, 2012, p. 736). Political discourse analysis focuses on discourse identified by its actors or authors, e.g. politicians, prime ministers, other members of government both at the local, national and international levels (van Dijk, 1998).

3.4.1. Sampling

In our study, we analysed three occasions in which Prime Minister Mark Rutte publicly addressed his personal opinions on and perspective for the (future of the) EU during the pre-Brexit phase. Transcripts of these speeches were published on the webpage of the Dutch government. Complementarily to these speeches, we looked at various interviews Mark Rutte gave in leading European newspapers, including *El País*, the *Financial Times*, and the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*. After sampling our data, we read the transcripts of the speeches and interviews and underlined every statement that seemed relevant at a first glance. We used this loose form of coding in order to identify relevant aspects that speak to our research question. While analysing our data we looked for discursive continuities and discontinuities with regards to the Dutch government’s understanding and arguments about the role of the Netherlands in the EU. Subsequently, this new data was then compared to the Dutch EU narrative under Mark Rutte brought up in the reviewed literature, in an attempt to establish whether or not Brexit has engendered alterations in the position of the Netherlands in the EU.

3.5. Self-Completion Questionnaires

A third method applied in our research, as a supplemental basis of our analysis, were self-completion questionnaires. Interviews are ‘the main road to multiple realities’ (Stake, 1995, p. 64). Self-completion questionnaires are remarkably similar to the structured interview method of social science. A central difference lies in the fact that with self-completion questionnaires,

there is no interviewer to ask the questions; instead, participants are to read as well as answer each question by themselves (Bryman, 2012). In our research, questions were systematically asked in a consistent order, but respondents were allowed freedom and encouraged to digress (Berg, 2009). Self-completion questionnaires, sometimes referred to as self-administered questionnaires, come in different forms. In this research, we chose one of the most prominent forms of this research method, namely the mail questionnaire (Bryman, 2012).

3.5.1. Sampling

For our research we sampled our participants on the basis of purposive sampling (Bryman, 2012). With this non-probability form of sampling, our objective was to sample respondents in light of their occupation and relevance to the field of study. We attempted to obtain the perspectives of practitioners in the field, e.g. EU officials, and use their responses as a complimentary source to corroborate or possibly challenge our findings from document and discourse analysis data. It is key to have a strong advanced plan prior to conducting interviews (Stake, 1995). The interview guide and consent form are to be found in annex A and B. The complete list of respondents as well as the filled-out questionnaires of our respondents can be encountered in annex C and D of this dissertation. Ethical considerations are highly significant and were carefully taken into consideration. All respondents participated voluntarily and could have withdrawn from the study at all times. Furthermore, the respondents participated on the basis of informed consent and the highest level of confidentiality was maintained.

3.6. Validity and Reliability

Regardless of the chosen methodology, it is always recommendable to consider the concepts of validity and reliability in social sciences. Whereas reliability is related to the question of whether the results of a study are repeatable, validity deals with the integrity of the conclusions that are generated from a study. In qualitative research, validity tends to receive more attention as reliability is especially difficult to achieve (Bryman, 2012). Taylor and Bogdan (1998, p. 9) go as far as arguing that “it is not possible to achieve perfect reliability if we are to produce valid studies of the real world”.

Scott (2006) provided four criteria for reliability, which have been maintained upon the appraisal of documents in this analysis:

- **Authenticity:** we addressed whether our data was genuine and original;
- **Credibility:** although it is virtually impossible to reach full certainty that all information in our data is free from errors, the credibility of the documents – including the honesty and accuracy of its information – was determined;
- **Representativeness:** all employed documents in this research were typical of their kind;
- **Meaning:** the textual analysis of a document might be different for the author, reader or subject of study. The data for this research consisted mostly of studies and official documents, in which evidence is clear and comprehensible (Scott, 2006).

With respect to interviewing (or, in our case, questionnaires), a prime threat to validity is that respondents may be demanding or at times insulted when interviewed by someone less powerful, e.g. a student, and will assume the knowledge and competence of the interviewer (Cohen et al., 2008). In order to increase the validity of the self-completion questionnaires, the interviewer was informed and prepared to the best of his ability.

3.7. Limitations

We are aware of limitations in our research. They lie primarily in the qualitative research method of self-completion questionnaires. Whereas some experts and practitioners refused to be interviewed or did not have the time, others were unavailable to contact. The impact of the SARS-Cov-2 virus might have, at least partially, played a role in this regard. Low response rates in questionnaires are one of the most damaging limitations as compared to other interview-based studies. Other factors include the lack of opportunity to probe respondents to elaborate an answer, which can be very important in open-ended questionnaires; the collection of additional data; the difficulty to ask many questions as well as a greater risk of missing data. Furthermore, we did not manage to interview many EU practitioners of the entire political spectrum, analysing differences from both right- and left-wing and pro-EU and Eurosceptic parties. These limitations highlight the difficulty of collecting data by means of expert interviews.

4 Analysis

The significance of the withdrawal of the UK from the EU is sizeable for the Netherlands. In fact, according to various studies, the Netherlands is one of the EU Member States that stands out for having the highest exposure to Brexit (IMF, 2016; The Economist, 2019; Dhingra et al., 2016). From an economic and financial perspective, the Netherlands will be affected starkly due to the strong trade, investment, and financial links it holds with the UK as well as closely aligned objectives in terms of regulatory and trade policy (Chen et al., 2018). According to the OECD, the economic impact will be primarily felt via trade, as exports account for 50% of the Netherlands' gross domestic product (GDP) compared to the 39% EU average (Smith, Arriola, Carrico, & van Tongeren, 2019).

The stock of investment of the Netherlands in the UK in the 2014-16 period is equivalent to an average of almost 80% of its GDP, the highest share in the EU (The Economist, 2019). Large multinationals, such as Unilever, are headquartered in both Rotterdam and London while Royal Dutch Shell has its headquarters in the Hague, but is incorporated in Britain. In total, the exposure on economic grounds of the Netherlands is over 4% of its GDP. Together with other economically affected countries such as Belgium, Germany, and Ireland, the Netherlands will therefore have more to gain from a relatively seamless and comprehensive UK-EU Free Trade Agreement than other EU Member States (Chen et al., 2018). As LI expects, the national preferences of remaining Member States will vary with the intensity of their economic relations with the UK (Schimmelfennig, 2018). However, aside from the economic damage, the greatest impact will be on the position of the Netherlands in the EU.

4.1. A Shift in Power Balance

The UK has been an influential EU Member State and has contributed more than most to shape European integration by both constraining and promoting EU initiatives (Cini & Verdun, 2018). When we consider the influence of the UK as an EU Member State, in order to understand the implications of Brexit for the power dynamics within the Council of the EU, it should be noted that the UK has typically been an opposing voice and an advocate for greater caution regarding expenditure and political deepening of the EU (Cini & Verdun, 2018). If we divide the influence of the UK in the EU in two different roles, we can observe a constraining and supportive role. The UK often sought to constrain or veto EU initiatives, such as in the negotiations of the

Maastricht Treaty and the reform of the Lisbon Treaty. In its supportive role, the UK has promoted various initiatives, from the introduction of regional and cohesion policy in the 1970s to the design of the architecture of the Economic and Monetary Union (EMU) and Justice and Home Affairs pillars (even though it ultimately never became a full member of both). As a result of being a large Member State, and its inherent size in policy influence, the UK was also able to contribute largely to the shaping of the enlargement policy (Cini & Verdun, 2018).

Likewise, it continuously advocated for a more liberal economic agenda within the EU. The economic and political impact of Brexit on the EU will be far from uniform (Polish Economic Institute, 2019). Its loss will primarily impact a certain group of smaller Member States that share the UK's liberal, progressive and outspoken agenda (Csanyi, 2017), among which the Netherlands. In a post-Brexit Council, it will be harder to block illiberal measures. When combined, northern allies, including the Netherlands, will lose about 12% of their voting power (De Gruyter, 2018). Southern states, conversely, will gain power. Brexit will constitute a geopolitical loss for the Netherlands, as it has often sided with the UK on a range of prominent policy areas within the EU, such as the liberalisation of global trade by means of broad trade agreements, pursuing a common equal-access European market, policy cooperation through Europol as well as the promotion of a well administered EU, including budgetary management and effective legislation (AIV, 2018). Moreover, the Atlantic orientation shared by the UK and the Netherlands as well as its strategic position balancing a triangle of great powers (i.e.: Germany, France and the UK) will be lost.

To which extent the UK's exit will affect decision outcomes depends partly on its positions in the Council. As analysed in our literature review, alignments of states are generally issue-based formed. However, some structural patterns have become clearer over the years. Recent research by Hix et al. (2016) suggests a clear difference in British actions in the Council of Ministers. Analysing data between 2009 and 2015, the Netherlands was among the main allies of the UK, along with some of its northern European neighbours. Inversely, Germany was least likely to vote in line with the UK (Hix et al., 2016).

Brexit's impact on legislative outcomes will therefore be advantageous to some, e.g. Spain, but possibly not to those who most often exhibited the same position as the UK in the Council. It is therefore likely that the Netherlands will be confronted with tough challenges with respect to defending its influence in the Council (Huhe et al., 2017). The remaining Member States with the closest ties to the UK and with the most similar policy positions will also be more negatively affected than the others in terms of policy impact and network centrality during Council negotiations.

Huhe et al. (ibid.) studied how Brexit could affect existing network in the council structures, particularly in the Council’s working groups and committees. In the networks that make up the EU’s decision-making processes we can perceive lines of cooperation and opportunities for sharing information and negotiating. If a Member State possesses a strong network centrality, then its strategic ability to quickly and easily assemble a larger number of allies (i.e. Member States) is increased. The Netherlands holds a strong degree of network centrality within the Council, but this will decrease in a post-Brexit Council (SIEPS, 2017). Network analyses indicate that therefore the Netherlands (along with Denmark, Ireland and Sweden) stands out as being particularly affected by Brexit. The Netherlands holds strong direct ties with the UK, which it, at present, is not able to compensate with easily accessible indirect ties when the UK does no longer partake in the network (Huhe et al., 2017). More concretely, the number of network steps between the Netherlands and other Member States increase with the UK’s withdrawal from the EU.

Brexit will induce a shift in the power balance as the importance of large Member States will increment. This change can be clearly seen in the example of potential new blocking minorities. On the one hand, in a post-Brexit context, a coalition of like-minded nations as Denmark, Germany, Ireland, the Netherlands, and Sweden comprises five of the 27 EU Member States accounting for 26.64% of the EU’s population (8.36% short for a blocking minority). France and Germany, on the other hand, will amount to 33.2% of the EU’s population post-Brexit and, hence, will almost immediately constitute a blocking minority (AIV, 2018). A formula by Gavrilov (2018) designed to understand possible scenarios in the post-Brexit Council as well as in the other EU institutions decision-making process, goes as follows.

Table 4.1. *Brexit and decision-making in EU institutions*

	Group	Examples
X	Large MS	FR, DE, IT, ES
Y	Medium MS	PL, RO, NL, PT, CZ, BE, EL, HU
Z1	Small MS west	AT, LU
Z2	Small MS east	BU, SK, SI, HR
Z3	Small MS north	LT, LV, DK, IE, EE, FI, SE
Z4	Small MS south	MT, CY

(Gavrilov, 2018)

With these variables the following possible situations in the decision-making process arise:

- A) $x + y > z$;
- B) $x + z > y$;
- C) $y + z > x$;
- D) the mobilisation of y and z to block decisions.

The cases we are most interested in are C and D, referring to small and medium-sized states in the context of Brexit (Gavrilov, 2018, pp. 127-129). Many states have taken the side of the UK in the decisional process; therefore, these states should now focus on coalition-building given how they will, more than before, have to rely on a broader roster of partners to make themselves heard in a post-Brexit EU (De Gruyter, 2018). An example includes the proposal for a gender quota directive that had been blocked by a minority including the UK and the Netherlands. Post-Brexit, this blocking minority will no longer exist, which raises the question if the proposal will still be put up to a vote at a later point in time (AIV, 2018).

Respondent 2 (2020), a senior account executive at a Brussels-based public affairs consultancy and former EP staff, mentions that the Netherlands risks finding itself isolated after a previous leadership of the UK as a heavy weight in policy- and decision-making. However, within the reviewed practice of structural cooperation, the Netherlands would nonetheless be able to fall back on a still-existing north-south divide. But in light of rapidly changing national politics, Respondent 2 (2020) adds that “there is uncertainty on Germany’s historic positions for the future and where it finds agreement with France as part of package deals, the Netherlands risks finding itself isolated”.

Fears over France’s ambitions, under Emmanuel Macron, over a fast-tracked political union do indeed exist (Poli, 2016). Some of these ambitions, just as France’s more protectionist outlook on issues including competition industrial policy and trade policy, could be at odds with Dutch interests. These positions are supported by other data. In the wake of Brexit, northern EU Member States fear a stronger drive toward deeper fiscal integration (Brattberg et al., 2020). The cautious stance towards the deepening of fiscal integration is also emphasised by Respondent 1, a British-Irish former staffer of the European Investment Bank and European Central Bank. Respondent 1 (2020) has observed a shift in Dutch EU policy since the start of the pre-Brexit phase in respect of the financial engagement with the EU, providing the example of a negative stance towards debt sharing amongst EU Member States. Regarding foreign and security policy, another concern involves declining support for the EU’s relationship with the US and a harder push toward European strategic autonomy (Brattberg et al., 2020). How has the Netherlands responded to these projections during the pre-Brexit phase?

4.2. Narrative and Networking

In a 2003 government publication, leading up to the Dutch Presidency of the Council of the European Union in 2004, it is clearly stated that the Netherlands sought more ‘European integration’. This included policy objectives of enlargement, deepening integration and strengthening the EU’s external policy. In addition, the government would promote the system of standards and values, in particular as developed in the Council of Europe (Rijksbegroting, 2003). In the first half of 2016, the Netherlands held the Presidency of the Council of the European Union again. However, the Netherlands’ public discourse no longer referred to ‘European integration’, a term which was entirely absent from the Presidency official paper (Werts, 2016). The Dutch government chose to replace it instead with the less ambitious (yet not bereft of implications) ‘European cooperation’. As described in the literature review, the cabinet at the time consisted of a coalition between the liberal (centre-right) and labour (centre-left) party. Hence, contradictions over the European project between the VVD and PvdA were kept out.

In recent years, the Netherlands has often been portrayed as Eurosceptic and linked with a Eurocritical attitude. For example, the *Financial Times* described the Netherlands as the ‘most obstructionist’ EU Member State (Financial Times, 2011), the *BBC* questioned whether the Netherlands will follow the UK with a ‘Nexit’ (Holligan, 2016), and Herman van Rompuy stated that the Dutch should say ‘yes’ more often (Alonso, 2017). This reputation is further supported by developments in national politics, where a new party, Forum for Democracy, created by anti-EU philosopher and party leader Thierry Baudet in 2017, rose to become the country’s second largest party in the polls in early 2018 (Schout, 2018). However, it is also too easy to present the Netherlands as Eurocritical. Even though fears do exist that the EU’s political-administrative system is not aligned with the reform-oriented Dutch society, the Dutch society is still deeply aware of the EU’s significance, and more so given how the official Dutch EU narrative by Mark Rutte emphasises that the Netherlands depends on the EU for its security and welfare (ibid.).

Taking growing sentiments of euroscepticism among the population and in politics seriously, Rutte repeatedly stressed in Brussels that he is not looking for ‘more Europe’ (De La Baume, 2017). However, in a conspicuous series of events that took place during the pre-Brexit phase, we observe an advancement in appearances of and number of occasions at which Mark Rutte spoke on the EU. The morning after the British voted in favour of Brexit, on 24 June 2016, Mark Rutte’s first statement read:

First response Prime Minister Rutte on outcome UK referendum
<i>“The result of the UK referendum is disappointing. We must now look for stable solutions, calmly, and one step at a time. It is important to ensure stability. We are in the process of reforming the European Union. This result is an incentive to carry on with that reform and work hard for more prosperity, more jobs and more security. Particularly for a country like the Netherlands, cooperation is of vital importance.”</i>

(Rijksoverheid, 2016)

Analysing this statement, two segments draw attention in the context of our study. In the first instance, the government projects to continue sailing the same course for its EU strategy as it has over the years before the Brexit referendum. The discursive emphasis remains on economic and security integration, with an EU ensuring jobs, increasing prosperity, and more security. This position reinforces our LI theoretical choice, as proponents of this theory argue that the preferences of national governments with respect to European integration have mainly reflected concrete economic interests (Moravcsik & Schimmelfennig, 2009). The second segment, however, subsumes a slightly more worrisome undertone for the Netherlands. As previously established, cooperation is reinforced as being of vital importance for the Netherlands and the government will have to respond to the geopolitical loss and shift in power balance induced by the vacuum created by Brexit. In order to determine a possible change in the official narrative, we analyse three speeches Mark Rutte has given on the (future of) the EU during the pre-Brexit phase.

Table 4.2. *Segments of the agenda of the Prime Minister of the Netherlands*

A series of EU discourse events during the pre-Brexit phase	
2 Mar 2018	Speech by the Prime Minister of the Netherlands, Mark Rutte, at the Bertelsmann Stiftung, Berlin, Germany
13 Jun 2018	Speech by Prime Minister Rutte on the future of the European Union – European Parliament, Strasbourg, France
13 Feb 2019	Churchill Lecture by Prime Minister Mark Rutte, Europa Institut at the University of Zurich, Switzerland

(Rijksoverheid, n.d.)

In his first major speech concerning the EU since he entered into office in 2010, Mark Rutte outlined his vision for the EU at the Bertelsmann Stiftung. Analysing his speech, we notice the reoccurring centrality of the French-German axis in EU integration, identifying that the EU is “not only about Macron and Merkel, but about how to go forward collectively” as well as the recognition of the fact that there will always be a strong bond between France and Germany:

“This always has a huge symbolic impact. But at the same time, it’s not a French-German Europe”. Furthermore, traditional visions are portrayed in Rutte’s discourse with phrases such as: “The EU needs to deliver on its basic promises; Brussels serves the member countries, not the other way around; and a deal is a deal”. Notwithstanding, being a founding nation of the EU, a sense of responsibility and obligation in how to go forward collectively is also detected (Rijksoverheid, 2018).

Explicit evolution in Mark Rutte’s stance towards the EU, however, is found in his speech at the European Parliament on 13 June 2018 upon the words: “my personal views on the importance of the EU have evolved over the years” (Rijksoverheid, 2018). From a constructivist standpoint, considerable significance is assigned to discourse in understanding institutional change and policy reform. Accordingly, it is possible to “infer implied interests from identities and discourse and then see if they in fact are present at the moment of choice” (Hopf, 2002, p. 268). This allows us to capture the influences of certain concepts in the behavior of the Netherlands. Whereas the prime interests of Mark Rutte previously focused on the Single Market and international trade policy, he later recognised in his speech at the European Parliament that the EU is also a community of values worth defending. Accordingly, a wider range of issues, including, among others, a common migration policy, joint control of external borders, and collective security amounted to areas in which the EU needed to focus. The speech also repeated that an ever-closer EU should not be a goal in itself, while emphasising that unity remained the future of the EU (Rijksoverheid, 2018).

A third instance at which Mark Rutte spoke on the EU took place during a Churchill Lecture at the Europa Institut in Zürich in non-EU Switzerland. This might have been Mark Rutte’s most outspoken speech on his vision for the EU during his stint as Prime Minister of the Netherlands. Rutte stated that the EU should be “less naïve and more realistic” about its foreign policy (Rijksoverheid, 2019). Furthermore, he argued that the EU should stand firm for the values it has always defended, such as democracy and human rights. In concrete terms, Rutte also referred to three areas in which the EU could prove itself: defending an international legal order in world trade, foreign policy, and energy policy. More specifically, Rutte argued that the World Trade Organisation (WTO) needs to be reformed; and EU decisions on international sanctions should no longer be taken unanimously, but by majority vote. Rutte added that the EU should also import its energy from the US, Canada, Norway, and countries in Africa and Asia, thus becoming less dependent on Russia and the Gulf States (Rijksoverheid, 2019). His proposal to give the European Commission more powers was remarkable: “through the European Commission, the Member States speak with a single voice to all EU trading partners.

We need the same unity and coordination in the sanctions policy and its supervision” (Rijksoverheid, 2019).

Mark Rutte’s speeches mark an increasingly assertive Netherlands in the EU stage. These developments are corroborated by the findings of Respondent 2 (2020), in the sense that the Netherlands has “taken a more leading role to ensure its perceived interests are well represented at EU-level”. Furthermore, Mark Rutte’s Churchill Lecture was accompanied by interviews with his vision on the EU published in five leading European newspapers including the *Financial Times* (UK), the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* (DE), *Le Monde* (FR), *El País* (ES), and the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* (CH).

In response to Brexit, Mark Rutte stated in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* that it is extremely important that EU members stick together and defend the rule-based world order as well as the rule of law (Kolb, 2019). When asked in *El País* about how the Netherlands situates itself in the new European scenario, Mark Rutte disclosed that, with the departure of the UK, the most powerful voice in favour of free trade and markets is leaving. He believes that the Netherlands must ensure that the free trade perspective will be maintained and finds common ground with Baltic and Scandinavian Member States in this regard (De Miguel, 2019). Mark Rutte also argues in various interviews that the UK will become a medium sized economy post-Brexit, somewhere in the Atlantic and unable to compete with either the EU or the US (Kolb, 2019; De Miguel, 2019), reaffirming that he does not envision a future outside of the EU for the Netherlands. To the *Financial Times*, Mark Rutte added that the traditional diplomatic role of the Netherlands as a mediator between big continental powers in Europe will be affected in the wake of Brexit (Khan, 2018a). Even though Brexit had yet to happen in formal terms and unknowingly in which fashion, the Netherlands had already started to reposition itself.

In this context, we observed a series of significant meetings with other EU heads of states during the first one and a half year subsequent to the referendum. During this period, the Netherlands incremented its networking diplomacy by seeking to strengthen ties with a number of other like-minded Member States. Exploring data from Mark Rutte’s agenda, we find that Mark Rutte sought to tighten bonds with numerous counterparts. Mark Rutte had rarely explored the field of influence so intensively (Alonso & Sadee, 2017). In April 2017, a meeting with his colleagues from Denmark and Ireland was organised in his formal residence. Two months later, the three Benelux states paid a visit to the V4, one month after Emmanuel Macron was elected in France. In the same month, a mini-summit was organised by the Dutch, inviting the Nordic and Baltic Member States as well as the remaining Benelux peers.

Table 4.3. *Segment of agenda Prime Minister of the Netherlands*

A series of striking networking events with EU heads of state during first half of the pre-Brexit phase		Visiting
		Visit from
26 Aug 2016	Informal EU consultation on invitation of Angela Merkel in Meseberg, DE	
29 Aug 2016	Prime Minister Miro Cerar of SI	
10 Oct 2016	Prime Minister Theresa May of UK	
7 Nov 2016	Meeting Dutch-Flemish Governments in Gent, BE	
8 Feb 2017	Prime Minister Beata Maria Szydlo of PL	
21 Apr 2017	Prime Minister Lars Rasmussen of DK and Enda Kenny of IE	
16 Jun 2017	President Emmanuel Macron (FR) in Paris, FR	
19 Jun 2017	Meeting Benelux and Visegrád members in Warsaw, PL	
21 Jun 2017	Prime Ministers Benelux, Baltics and Nordics	
26-27 Sep 2017	Prime Minister Armin Laschet of North Rhine Westphalia	
27 Sep 2017	Minister President Maris Kučinskis of LV	
31 Aug 2017	Working Dinner with President Emmanuel Macron (FR) in Paris, FR	
7 Sep 2017	President Jean Claude Juncker of European Commission in Brussels, BE	
6 Dec 2017	Prime Minister Leo Varadkar (IE) in Dublin, IE	
18 Jan 2018	European Commissioner Günther Oettinger	

Data gathered by author from the website of the Government of the Netherlands, available at (Rijksoverheid, n.d.).

On 18 June 2017, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands at the time, Bert Koenders (PvdA), announced in the Dutch political talk show *Buitenhof* that the Netherlands has more than one good friend in the EU and that, aside from the good relationship with Germany and France, the Netherlands is consulting multiple countries to discover similar policy interests and how to bring that together ‘into Brussels’ (Koenders, 2017). We can infer that these countries which were consulted constitute the Member States mentioned in table 4.3. This is also corroborated by our literature review, where we found that the Netherlands favours theme-specific alliances with like-minded Member States that are established via state visits and bilateral conferences. In addition, professor of International Relations and founder of *The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies*, Rob de Wijk, affirmed the theme-based approach of the Netherlands in *de Volkskrant* on 21 June 2017, stating: “The Netherlands will choose its friends for each policy component. It is fortunate for the Netherlands that Rutte masters that game very well.” (Righton, 2017).

The networking events with eastern European Member States could be explained by the natural relationship the Netherlands upholds with them regarding free trade. Both are in favour of free movement of workers and products, whereas a number of southern European countries support extensive regulation of the market (i.e. protectionism) (Kaeding & Selck, 2005). In addition to Germany, the Netherlands is seeking support from the Baltic States, the Benelux countries, but also Austria, Ireland, and Finland on monetary affairs and fiscal matters. It is in the interest of the Netherlands to counterbalance plans by France, for instance, for a European Finance Minister (AIV, 2018; Righton, 2017). In the following section we will look into whether these networking events have led to any substantial coalitions during the pre-Brexit phase.

4.3. EU Coalitions in Motion: Building Bridges or an Ivory Tower?

In preparation for if (or when) the UK would leave, the Netherlands had to increase its efforts in forming alliances with other Member States in order to defend its (often) liberal positions against pressure for higher subsidies and more regulations of the single market. The Dutch government states that a post-Brexit coalition approach will have to focus largely on the influential Franco-German axis, as well as on mobilising like-minded countries such as Belgium, Luxembourg, the northern and Baltic Member States, Austria, and Ireland and other partners. More than before, the Netherlands will be required to operate in a flexible manner (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2019).

The search for alternative coalitions or new allies started in 2017. Dutch leading newspaper *NRC* headlined “How Rutte went looking for new European Friends” in June 2017, on the eve of the European Council meeting of 22-23 June 2017 (Alonso & Sadee, 2017). The search had become urgent with the results of the elections in Germany and especially France. With the election of Emmanuel Macron as French President, a new dynamic emerged around the issue of EU reform (Rood, 2018). In addition, *Politico* headlined “Brexit redraws EU alliances” on 14 April 2018, depicting how smaller and medium-sized Member States which “long clustered around Britain as their guardian ally” are groping for new alliances, in order to prevent France and Germany steamrolling them into deeper integration after Brexit (Taylor, 2018).

In spite of the close relationship, both politically and personally, that Mark Rutte maintains with Angela Merkel and Emmanuel Macron (De Miguel, 2019), Brexit has undeniably led to new dynamics, which apply to the practice of coalition formations: a search for new partners and new equilibria. Liberal intergovernmentalism sustains that, sometimes, formations of

coalitions from which certain states are excluded are the best alternative to agreement based on unilateral action (Moravcsik, 1993). As learned in the previous section, the Netherlands has actively sought to tighten bonds with other EU Member States during the first half of the pre-Brexit phase (2016-2017). During this period, the networking efforts of the Netherlands was targeted at assembling theme-specific partners, differing per policy area. This could be partially explained by the dearth of a single large like-minded Member State which the Netherlands could rely on at numerous dossiers. However, as our literature review also showed, the Netherlands is already an active player in theme-specific coalitions.

Respondent 4, party leader of the governing political party D66 in the Dutch national parliament Rob Jetten, underlines that, in addition to the major drawbacks of Brexit, the Dutch cabinet also sees opportunities. That is why, since 23 June 2016, investments are being made in relations with other European countries to forge new coalitions (Jetten, 2020). As a counterweight to the Franco-German bloc, the Netherlands, alongside other smaller to medium sized northern European Member States, has been forging new regional groupings and ad hoc coalitions in order to influence the EU's orientation. Here we can identify the Netherlands behaving according to key liberal intergovernmentalist stages of state behaviour. The formation of coalitions with other members is necessary to secure a state's (core) interests. The involved states seek to utilise these new formats as a result of their concern regarding the prospects of a stronger Franco-German axis forming post-Brexit (Brattberg et al., 2020). Although some of these formats predate Brexit, others have expanded their relevance and scope in its aftermath.

4.3.1. The New Hanseatic League

One of the diplomatic side effects of Brexit has been the creation of a Dutch-led grouping of eight northern, trade-oriented and fiscally aligned EU governments. The eight Member States go by *New Hanseatic League* or *Hanseatic League 2.0.*, at times dubbed the *Gang of Eight*, or simply *the Hansa*, referring to the confederation of free-trading city states in the northern portion of Europe that began in the 14th century (The Economist, 2018).

The New Hanseatic League consists of Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Ireland, Latvia, Lithuania, the Netherlands, and Sweden, which have concentrated on the monetary union throughout 2018. The strength of the coalition, according to experts, is that it brings together different groups of countries within the EU, such as the Baltic States and the northern Member States (Clingendael, 2019). It also consists of small and medium-sized Member States that lack the diplomatic or lobbying ability to amplify their voice in the EU arena when acting alone

(Polish Economic Institute, 2019). As opposed to previously mentioned French-style political integration, the alliance shares an emphasis on national responsibility and the importance of honouring existing commitments (Khan, 2018b). This attitude reinforces the liberal intergovernmentalist idea that the institutionalisation of coalitions of states (like the EU or other coalitions) ensures a greater degree of compliance of common goals and rules on behalf of members. In essence, the Dutch initiative seeks to prevent the euro zone from becoming a transfer union. If each country were to focus on the industry, the currency union would automatically become an ironclad whole and an overarching solidarity mechanism would become unnecessary, as far as the position of the New Hanseatic League is concerned.

This kind of northern regional cooperation was brought into the limelight in March 2018, when the finance ministers from the eight states published a statement on the architecture of the European Monetary Union (EMU) (Hanseatic League, 2018). In the statement, the finance ministers of the Hanseatic League 2.0. stressed that the success of the euro zone is a result of a combination of the EU's leadership and wide-ranging reforms at national levels. Shared values and views among the eight members are also laid out, reflecting their centrality and thus reinforcing the importance of constructivism for explaining these dynamics. Coalitions based on shared values, ideology and culture derive their predictions from shared identities in which the Member States emerge from and are endogenous to interaction with institutional structures. In addition, LI posits that the outcome of international negotiations is dependent on the relative bargaining powers of Member States (Moravcsik & Schimmelfennig, 2009), thus emphasizing this theory's usefulness for understanding the formation of coalitions as a means for the Netherlands' efforts to ensure power balancing.

Respondent 4 (2020), Rob Jetten, has also underlined that the New Hanseatic League serves as a clear example of a coalition that emerged during the pre-Brexit phase, consecutive to the announcement of the UK to withdraw from the EU. The group identified inclusive discussions regarding future reforms as a priority, welcoming other countries that want to be heard in the debate on the future of the Eurozone (Hanseatic League, 2018). Furthermore, the first requirement for fortifying the EMU would be actions at the national level and compliance with agreed rules (Kuusik & Raik, 2018). The subsidiarity principle and a focus on compliance with agreed rules have been a recurring theme in the Dutch position towards the EU, in particular since Mark Rutte entered into office. Pooling or delegating national sovereignty is not a decisive source of state commitment. From a LI perspective, the unique structure of the EU is acceptable to national governments, such as the Netherlands, insofar as it permits them to attain goals

otherwise unachievable and does not weaken their control over domestic affairs (Moravcsik, 1993).

The position paper draws on the completion of the Banking Union as well as the strengthening of the European Stability Mechanism and the development thereof into the European Monetary Fund. Finally, the Multiannual Financial Framework is regarded as a tool for supporting national governments to realise structural reform. The alliance of eight is apt to be aligned with Germany in discussions regarding the future of the euro area. Germany is the closest partner in the EU framework for the group, being fiscally conservative and valuing inclusivity. Doubts have been cast, however, in respect of Germany's motives and plans in collaborating with France (Kuusik & Raik, 2018).

Responses from the rest of the EU to the common positions of the group of eight have been diverse. Whereas French finance minister Bruno Le Maire declared that he was "not comfortable" dealing with the eight to ten countries calling for more national responsibility and stronger rules, German finance minister Olaf Scholz, in contrast, told the *Financial Times* that he welcomed countries advocating common positions as a part of the EU growing closer together. Wopke Hoekstra, finance minister of the Netherlands emphasised that the alliance is not established against others (Khan, 2018c). Interestingly enough, the leading role of the Netherlands within the Hanseatic coalition could also be damaging to the image of the Netherlands itself. To be known as a leader of a 'non-constructive' alliance could be detrimental to the effectiveness of their own advocacy (Clingendael, 2019).

In the aforementioned interview with Spanish newspaper *El País*, Mark Rutte was asked about how he matches defending the unity of the EU but at the same time promotes the north-south division by leading a northern coalition. He declared that the point of collaborating with the Baltic and Scandinavian countries, and also with Ireland and Slovenia, is to make it clear that "a deal is a deal". Mark Rutte stressed his favourability for a strong euro area but emphasised that it should be achieved through competitiveness and not through north-south transfers (De Miguel, 2019).

Where does the New Hanseatic League fit into the forms of structural cooperation, in terms of the previously laid out categories? Can it be classified as an ad-hoc coalition, political in nature but focusing on a single issue, or an alliance that emerged at the political level, structural in nature and covering multiple issues? The new group is not sufficiently powerful to form a blocking minority under QMV. However, neither is, for instance, the V4 (Korteweg, 2018). At present, collaboration seems to be maintained on an ad-hoc basis, as there is no evidence that the group of eight will become structural or will cover a range of different subjects. This

changing nature of alliances for the purpose of advancing national interests is explained by LI. In order to mutually benefit, Member States must overcome collectively suboptimal outcomes and achieve coordination or cooperation (Moravcsik & Schimmelfennig, 2009). However, the Hansa collaboration could evolve into an alliance in the future. The deputy prime minister of Ireland, Simon Coveney, proclaimed, in a speech on 11 April 2018 in The Hague, that he expects the Hanseatic states to shape proposals on such issues as the Middle East peace process and relations with the African continent (Coveney, 2018).

Still, there are reasons to be sceptical. The Netherlands claims leadership of this coalition, but the Baltic and Nordic states already meet in the Nordic-Baltic Six (NB6) formation. Unlike the V4, for example, which upholds a rotating group presidency, the NB6 is leaderless and issue based. Equality is a prime feature of the NB6, making any bid for leadership unnatural. Moreover, coalitions are formed depending on specific issues. The group shares diverging attitudes towards EU integration and, therefore, there is an underlying caution towards Dutch leadership, as there was towards any instances of leadership from the UK (Kuusik & Raik, 2018). In line with LI tenets, states' preferences and identities are not uniform and, hence, national preferences of states, such as the ones in this coalition, rarely converge precisely.

Other challenges may also emerge when considering the new EU budget, where the three Baltics (net recipients) will confront the net contributors with their hard line as well as dissimilar ambitions when it comes to the European migration policy and resettlement of migrants and asylum seekers (Korteweg, 2018). Lastly, the group consists of both eurozone members and non-eurozone members (Denmark and Sweden). Even though Sweden is obliged under the Treaty of Maastricht to join the eurozone and adopt the euro, public support is lacking¹¹ and Denmark and Sweden are not likely to join the eurozone any time soon.

A binding factor between Mark Rutte and his Scandinavian counterparts is their pragmatism, being non-political visionaries and sharing a liberal, no-nonsense approach. This kind of convergence of identities and ideals is important for coalition formations, from a constructivist perspective. Diplomats from the eight countries have indicated that cooperation allows for smaller Member States to exercise their collective influence on the eurozone debate, regularly supporting causes that have in the past been pushed by Germany. According to LI, larger Member States hold the strongest political leverage, and coalitions are formed in order to secure the advancement of national interests. These initiatives furthermore demonstrate that,

¹¹ The Swedish public voted against accession to the eurozone. 56% said 'no' to the question: 'Do you think that Sweden should introduce the euro as its currency?' with a turnout of 81.2% (House of Commons, 2003).

in light of the Netherlands' positions, movement is predominantly taking place on the northern and eastern areas of the EU, clearly motivated by the loss of the UK as a partner in sensitive topics on the European reform agenda (De Gruyter, 2018).

Nevertheless, it will be practically impossible to form a population-based blocking minority without Germany, the largest Member State. If it fails to mobilise a single large ally (i.e. Germany, France and to a lesser extent Italy, Spain, or Poland), the Netherlands will invariably require the support of no less than twelve other (smaller) Member States in order to form a blocking minority (AIV, 2018). Among larger Member States, Poland could have a role to play (Arak, 2018). Regarding a future standing, the Polish Institute for Economics presents Poland as a suitable candidate to join the Hansa as it has access to the Baltic Sea, and shares the Hansa's strategic goals (Polish Economic Institute, 2019).

4.3.2. Reinforced Ties with France

It has become apparent that these partnerships, as a result of limited power and variable contacts, would not suffice in securing Dutch interests in and of themselves. Bas Eickhout, Dutch MEP for the European Green Party asserted that “we do not belong with the big ones who distrust each other, but neither are we small. We are right in the middle, and that's a very important position in Europe” (Eickhout, 2018). Hence, considering that the strong Franco-German axis cannot be balanced without the UK, and that Dutch-German relations have traditionally been very tight, strengthening ties with France could potentially support Dutch interests (Jetten, 2020).

Respondent 4, Rob Jetten, finds that the relationship between the Netherlands and Germany has always been very strong and that the one between France and the Netherlands appears to have intensified since Brexit (Jetten, 2020). Even though Franco-Dutch relations have traditionally been less intensive than Dutch-German relations, French-Dutch positions are more aligned than often assumed (AIV, 2018). However, when analysing the interaction preferences between the states, a weakness appears. With respect to the density of contact between France and the Netherlands, we observe a strong focus of the Netherlands on France. However, French reciprocity appears to be weak. Conversely, France is not included in the list of preferred partners of the Netherlands at all, while France perceives the Netherlands to be among the top five most influential of all EU Member States (Janning, 2019).

During the pre-Brexit phase, Emmanuelle Macron and Mark Rutte met at various occasions. The political leaders of France and the Netherlands united the party of President

Macron *La République en Marche!* with other liberal European parties, including the VVD of Mark Rutte (Herszenhorn & De La Baume, 2018). In October 2019 the first EU summit of the Renew Europe Group brought together seven liberal heads of state of governments (Belgium, Czech Republic, Estonia, France Luxembourg, the Netherlands, and Slovenia) to, among others, discuss the latest updates on Brexit (Renew Europe, 2019).

A field in which Dutch and French interests coincide and which may lead to possible future structural cooperation is climate policy. Following a constructivist logic, interests coincide because (converging) “identities are the basis of interests” (Wendt, 1992, p. 398). The withdrawal of the UK means the departure of a like-minded partner with regards to the Netherlands’ climate ambitions (AIV, 2018). From the Dutch Prime Minister’s speech at the EP in Strasbourg in 2018, we observe that, during the pre-Brexit phase, the Dutch government has been searching for a coalition with France, referring explicitly to France as a partner “to lead the way on this new climate ambition” (Rijksoverheid, 2018).

A tangible result in the climate policy area of French-Dutch cooperation was the launch of the European Plastic Pact by Dutch Minister of Environment and Housing, Stientje van Veldhoven (D66), who, together with her French counterpart, lead the initiative (Rijksoverheid, 2020). This example was also provided by respondent 4, Rob Jetten (Jetten, 2020). The idea started between three ministers (Denmark, France, the Netherlands) at the meeting of environmental ministers in Brussels in 2019. After the launch of the Plastic Pact in the Netherlands and France, enthusiasm grew to realise a pan-EU project. The European Plastics Pact consists of a series of agreements between plastic producers, large companies, governments, and recyclers (Rijksoverheid, 2020). German support is inevitable; however, the country is taking a less strong line on this matter as a result of its dependence on Russian gas and the Nord Stream II pipeline. Current partners in this policy area, aside from France, include Luxembourg, Portugal, and Sweden. Potential coalition partners can also be found in the 17 countries belonging to the Green Growth Group¹² (AIV, 2018).

4.3.3. The Frugal Four and Germany

Brexit signified growing dependence on the Netherlands’ closest partner, Germany. The ECFR Coalition Explorer reveals that ties between the two states are mutually strong. After France, the Netherlands is Germany’s most important EU partner. Although the Franco-German coalition will likely remain the most important coalition within a post-Brexit EU, we cannot

¹² This group consists of AT, BE, DE, DK, EE, ES, FI, FR, IE, IT, LU, NL, PT, SE, SI, and (non-EU) NO, UK.

forget that Germany's position also changed as a result of Brexit. French and German positions are not aligned on the elaboration or 'details' of policy decisions. As indicated by Veen (2011), Member States may have shared interests in a particular policy area, but differ in views on how they address specific issues. Concurrently, Germany is committed to maintaining unity within the EU and is also looking for partners in a post-Brexit EU.

In an all-encompassing study, Clingendael (2019) asserts that the Netherlands is so far well positioned in the EU. The Netherlands is seen as pragmatic, well prepared, and very credible. Dutch civil servants and the Permanent Representative are regarded as highly skilled, well prepared, with a high degree of institutional knowledge. At the same time, however, it has been established that the Netherlands is not known for a high degree of empathy or solidarity towards other EU Member States (Clingendael, 2019). A recent example of this was when the Netherlands continued to impose tough conditions on a European emergency aid for economically weaker southern European countries, in danger of collapsing entirely as a consequence of the Covid-19 crisis. This example is, however, anachronistic in the context of our overall analysis, which concludes on 31 January 2020. As mentioned by Respondent 1 (2020), the initial response to the Covid-19 emergency aid fund – seen from a Dutch perspective as paving the way for stability bonds (also 'Eurobonds', and, in this regard 'Coronabonds') and hence something to be firmly opposed to – was "quite notable".

Italy has been one of the hardest hit EU Member States by Covid-19. Structural economic reforms, adopted after the financial crisis, under pressure of EU institutions, contributed to the weakening of its health care system (van de Pas, 2020). Respondent 2 (2020) believes the Netherlands has found itself isolated, by easily wiping off a proposal regarding debt-mutualisation in the form of Eurobonds and was consequently broadly named and shamed in public media. Most newspapers were indeed extremely critical. Italian newspapers *Corriere della Sera* and *La Repubblica* have written about Prime Minister Mark Rutte's 'cruelty' and that the Netherlands serves as a tax haven for Italian multinationals, causing Italy to miss out on tax revenues. Portuguese Prime Minister António Costa called the Dutch attitude 'repugnant' and even questioned its commitment to the EU (Oliveira, 2020). Diplomatic relations were affected.

The Netherlands did, however, not entirely find itself isolated. Germany has been the strongest opponent of Eurobonds, supported by Austria, Finland, the Netherlands, and Estonia. Instead, they favour the European Stability Mechanism (ESM), which was created by depending on financial strength to then borrow money on the market at favourable conditions (DW, 2020). Yet, a new network of alliances is arising as Member States are concerned with the recovery packages intended for fuelling the Member States' post-Covid-19 economies. An

increase in cooperation between the Netherlands, Austria, Denmark, and Sweden has been observed, under the nomenclature of *the Frugal Four*. Mark Rutte is seen the leader of the Frugal Four and he has “used the quartet to improve his standing in the EU after Brexit and show that The Hague was not isolated on key economic issues” (Khan, 2020). As LI assumes, the existence of opportunities to build coalitions strengthens the bargaining powers of these smaller and medium-sized Member States (Moravcsik, 1998).

In an unofficial diplomatic non-paper listing the countries’ position, the four Member States argued for a European Recovery Fund based on a modernised EU budget that ensured Member States are “better prepared for the next crisis” (Frugal Four, 2020). Their main objective is “to provide temporary, dedicated funding through the MFF and offer favourable loans to those who have been most severely affected by the crisis” (Frugal Four, 2020). Respondent 3 (2020), a research consultant at a Brussels-based consultancy, formerly employed at the EC and Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, indicates that the Frugal Four and their counterparts, Friends of Cohesion, were a topic of discussion during a meeting with the Dutch COREPER II in early 2019.

The Frugal Four have, at times, met with German presence, as the five Member States advocate for a smaller post-Brexit budget than the 1.11% of the EU’s GNI as proposed by the EC. This would entail limiting spending to 1% of GNI. The same grouping is backing the retainment of reductions in their contributions (i.e. rebates) when the UK, the original recipient of a rebate, withdraws from the EU. The success of this alliance strongly depends on its largest and most influential Member State, Germany. Belgium, Finland, and Ireland do not take part in it but also want to spend less than the proposed numbers by the EC as well (Bayer, 2019).

Finland joined the Frugal Four in their reunions during the EU Summit in July 2020 in which the MFF 2021-2027 and Recovery Instrument were negotiated (Kurz, 2020; Kerres, 2020). This could, as LI predicts, lead to forming new coalitions or enlargement of existing coalitions based on states’ interests and strengthen the bargaining power of protentional coalition members. Furthermore, they are protentional members of more viable coalitions (Moravcsik, 1993).

5 Discussion

This study set out to determine whether the Netherlands has altered its stance towards the EU during the pre-Brexit phase on the basis of coalition formations in the Council of the European Union. We also sought to analyse this case in light of two prominent theories of international relations, namely constructivism and liberal intergovernmentalism. Firstly, we determined the role of the Netherlands as a Member State of the EU and the practice of coalition formations in this context. Subsequently we analysed whether there has been a shift in this regard during the pre-Brexit phase, on the basis of official government and diplomatic statements, discourse analysis of speeches by the Prime Minister of the Netherlands Mark Rutte, supported by peer-reviewed studies on networking and patterns of cooperation in the Council in the wake of Brexit, media reports, and questionnaires with practitioners.

The UK officially withdrew from the EU on 31 January 2020. Bearing in mind our research question, the collective evidence points towards the idea that the Netherlands has become more assertive in its EU policy as a result of the UK's announcement to withdraw. From the outset, in our literature review, we established the traditional role of the Netherlands as an EU Member State and how it evolved during the decade that Prime Minister Mark Rutte has served as the country's head of state. Existing literature consensually identifies the Netherlands as a traditionally pro-European and pro-EU integration Member State since the beginning of the European project. The traditional Dutch EU narrative of economic progress and security hinges on a rule-based perspective on European integration. As a relatively small country, the Netherlands has punched above its weight in global economy for centuries.

As stated by Respondent 2 (2020), the Netherlands is unique in its EU membership as it, on the one hand, strongly resists further EU integration on initiatives such as the Common Consolidated Corporate Tax Base, but, on the other hand, actively leads an EU anti-money laundering approach. The Netherlands has favoured open markets and international competitiveness throughout its EU membership, while also emphasising social security and equality. The commercialist attitude and focus on liberal, economic development has unmistakably come across in the role of the Netherlands as a Member State. The historically pro-EU Dutch narrative, with a strong focus on economic integration, more so than French-style political integration, appears to be a direct result of its open, international economy, maintaining strong trade links to its European neighbours.

We found that, in recent years, scepticism towards the EU has incremented in the Netherlands. Previous research has found a clear EU agenda from the Dutch government has been lacking and a clear stance has been absent in EU debates since Mark Rutte has been in office (Schout & Wiersma, 2013; Alonso, 2016). Mark Rutte is not known as a great political visionary, in particular with respect to European integration. He is the ‘official spokesman of the EU narrative’ in the Netherlands, which has translated into growing critical sentiments towards the EU in Dutch society (De La Baume, 2017; Harryvan & van der Harst, 2017; European Commisison, 2019).

During the pre-Brexit phase, however, our results demonstrate a clear shift in the narrative regarding Dutch EU policy as well as on its future intentions as a Member State. Domestically, the Prime Minister has repeatedly warned over the consequences of non-membership – in particular for a country with an economy highly benefitting from and, thus, heavily dependent on the EU’s internal market. Mark Rutte has vocally positioned himself on the remain-side of the British argument, advocating for a future EU which includes the UK as a member. This is undoubtedly bolstered by the relations the Dutch and Britons used to maintain within EU decision-making. More precisely, the Netherlands and the UK continuously advocated for a more liberal economic agenda within the EU. The Netherlands, and other smaller Member States sharing its liberal, progressive, and outspoken agenda, will primarily be impacted by the loss of this heavyweight in policy shaping and decision-making. Our analysis has shown how small- and medium sized Member States will be affected in the organisation of blocking minorities in an EU without the UK. This example has been used in various studies to assess the decision-making process under QMV in a post-Brexit EU.

During the pre-Brexit phase we have seen a strong increase in EU-related political discourse by Mark Rutte. As a head of state formerly lacking a solid vision for the European project, Mark Rutte publicly addressed his views on the EU at numerous instances and occasions. The most remarkable results to emerge from the discourse analysis section of our study is the shift in EU narrative and vision for the EU of the Dutch Prime Minister during the pre-Brexit phase. Whereas Member States sovereignty (i.e. strong support for the subsidiarity principle) and a strong focus on the internal market best encompass the view of the Dutch government on the European integration project under Rutte, ensuing the UK’s announcement to withdraw, we found a call for a Union beyond economic cooperation, namely one of values in which unity is the future.

Rutte’s personal views on the importance of the EU have changed and he has since proposed to hand more powers over to the European Commission. The loss of the UK as a

heavyweight partner in the EU instigated a rethinking of the importance of EU cooperation for the Dutch Prime Minister. From a constructivist perspective, the social relation between the Netherlands and the EU depends on the beliefs and ideas held by both actors. If these beliefs and ideas change, the social relationship can evolve into, e.g. deeper integration. During his first 10 years of office, Mark Rutte showed little interest in European affairs. As a result of the sudden loss of the like-minded British, he has decided to take a more active leadership role in the EU context (Taylor, 2018). These results lead us to consider our first hypothesis validated: there has been a shift in the Netherlands' EU policy narrative and the Netherlands has indeed more explicitly addressed its vision for the (future of the) EU since the UK announced its withdrawal.

We may now witness the emergence of a new official EU narrative and pragmatic approach towards safeguarding the influence of the Netherlands on the basis of coalitions (Schout, 2018). Mark Rutte has quickly become the EU's leading voice on free trade. As constructivists argue, interests and identities can change through the interaction with other actors. In this case, this evolution is primarily due to the fact that, subsequent to the UK's departure, the Netherlands still remains one of the largest of the smaller Member States. This lends support to previous findings in the literature that the Netherlands is regarded the most influential of the affluent smaller Member States (Janning, 2016). Early alliances in which the Netherlands partook have played a significant role in the shaping of the EU and in the establishment of the interplay with large Member States, compensating for asymmetries in size, weight and power among smaller Member States. Decision-making in the Council has markedly changed over the past decade. Particularly, the 2004 enlargement to central and eastern Europe, the introduction of the Lisbon Treaty and changes to the internal rules of procedures in 2009 have led to significant changes.

Previous literature has shown that, much like its approach towards the EU in general, the Dutch commitment to coalition formation within the EU is highly pragmatic in nature (van der Bij & Rood, 2016). Literature has also demonstrated that the Netherlands has a strong preference for theme-based coalitions, moving about in different Member State configurations, depending on the subject or policy area (IOB, 2014; van der Bij & Rood, 2016). Preferred partners, however, used to include large neighbours Germany and the UK, liberal allies Denmark, Finland, Sweden, the Baltics, as well as Ireland and Austria. We found that, during the pre-Brexit phase, policymakers and planners in The Hague had cause to review the Netherlands' place and role in its interactions with Member States. Just as LI would expect, alignments change frequently, depending on the issues at hand, the preferences of states and changes in the political context.

When looking at the first half of the pre-Brexit phase, in 2016 and 2017, we see the first steps into incrementing network diplomacy events by means of strengthening ties with a number of like-minded Member States. Here we can observe the behaviour of the Netherlands corresponding to both our theories. LI interest-based factors suggest the Netherlands choosing the alternative it most prefers in situations of interdependent choice with the driving purpose of advancing its national interests. Constructivist explanations derive their predictions from shared identities in which the interests of the Netherlands emerge from and build on the idea that like-minded states cooperate and act on the basis of shared understandings of the world around them. Exploring data from Mark Rutte's agenda we found that already strong diplomatic relations were intensified with Ireland, Denmark, Nordic, and Baltic Member States.

During the second half of the pre-Brexit phase we witnessed actual new alliances being formed. The Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs asserted that, as a consequence of Brexit, more than in the past, the country will require an ability to operate in a connecting, bridging manner and flexible fashion (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2019). Brexit has served as an immediate impulse for a new alliance: The New Hanseatic League, comprised of eight northern European Member States. As predicted by liberal intergovernmentalism, coalitions are forged in order to balance power and advance domestically determined preferences. Following the UK's withdrawal, smaller members have no security in the representation of their interests as the balance has shifted and tilted towards a stronger Franco-German axis.

In a statement by the finance ministers of the Hanseatic League 2.0., the eight members emphasised shared values and views, conforming to constructivist theory. They also identified inclusive discussions regarding future reforms as a priority. Furthermore, the first requirement to fortify the EMU are actions at the national level. In line with LI stages of state behaviour, the focus on sovereignty for Member States – something which we also detected when analysing the EU policy agenda of the Netherlands – as well as compliance with agreed rules were identified as key factors binding the grouping.

Thus far, the Hanseatic alliance seems to primarily serve as a joint initiative to counterbalance French-German ideas. In line with LI expectations, Member States with similar structural positions form coalitions with the purpose of power balancing. The New Hanseatic League was successful in shaping the final outcome of the December 2018 Euro Summit and in blocking maximalist positions defined in the Franco-German 'Meseberg declaration'¹³

¹³ A joint Franco-German declaration that was adopted during the Franco-German Council of Ministers which took place 19 June 2018 in Meseberg, Germany.

(Tesche, 2019; Federal Government of Germany, 2018). However, the grouping is not large enough to function as a blocking minority. We found that cooperation is likely to be maintained on an ad-hoc basis, as there is no evidence that the group of eight is structural or covers a range of subjects. This vindicates the LI claim that preference patterns are issue-specific. However, even though important differences exist – e.g. Sweden is currently governed by a social democratic party; the Baltics are net recipients of the EU budget – future works should monitor this coalition and how it manifests itself in the EU context.

Conforming to our LI framework, which sustains that coalitional dynamics tend to favour large states as its participation is necessary for viable coalitions (Moravcsik, 1993), we also found that without the support of a large Member State, coalition formations are highly complicated. It remains to be seen what role Germany will take in a post-Brexit EU. As relations between Germany and the Netherlands remain solid, in particular since Angela Merkel and Mark Rutte have been heads of government, we examined whether changes have taken place in Franco-Dutch relations. During the pre-Brexit phase, the Netherlands seems to have somewhat increased its focus on France. Even though Emmanuel Macron did not want to be politically labelled for a long time, his party ultimately works together with Mark Rutte's VVD within the liberal political party of the EP 'Renew Europe'. A second finding includes a joint initiative by the Dutch and French Ministers of Environment leading the European Plastic Pact on a European level. However, although beyond the scope of this dissertation, considering the divergent interests and stances toward the EU budget and EU recovery plan during the EU summit of July 2020, it remains to be seen how Franco-Dutch relations within the EU context will advance.

Nevertheless, the Netherlands is increasingly associated with Austria, Denmark, and Sweden as part of the Frugal Four. A non-paper by the group argued for a European Recovery Fund based on a modernised EU budget, ensuring Member States are “better prepared for the next crisis” (Frugal Four, 2020, p. 2). Their main objective is to provide temporary, dedicated funding through the MFF and to offer favourable loans to those who have been most severely affected by the Covid-19 crisis. These insights serve to support our second hypothesis that the Netherlands did assume a leadership role in forming coalitions, thus filling the void left by the UK's withdrawal. As shown, these coalitions do indeed consist of liberal, smaller, and medium-sized northern European countries with whom the Netherlands already partnered with on a regular basis, leading us to validate our third hypothesis. Even though Austria and Ireland are not culturally or geographically considered northern, both countries do form part of the northerners in the EU's north-south division.

In the *State of the European Union 2020*, the government of the Netherlands highlights that it will have to work harder to be heard on issues including free market, EU budget and transatlantic relations. This will be achieved by putting forward its own initiatives and forming new coalitions, as found in our study (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2020). The next national election to elect the members of the House of Representatives is scheduled for 17 March 2021. Current polls indicate Mark Rutte's VVD party to remain the largest party with 44 seats in parliament. Meanwhile, the second largest party is only polled at 15 seats (Ipsos, 2020). However, at the same time, Mark Rutte lost the majority in parliament with his four-party coalition and the political landscape in the Netherlands, with two Eurosceptic parties gaining ground, is shifting and limiting Rutte's room to negotiate at the EU level.

Although the more assertive attitude from the Dutch is a constructive development in its endeavours to forge new coalitions or reinforce existing structural patterns of cooperation, it would be beneficial to the Netherlands and its position in the EU to undertake a bridging role in the north-south divide, as opposed to accentuating it. This, in view of constructivism, could subsequently lead to additional strategic partnerships. Socialisation can lead to the adoption of shared identities among states which could enhance the prospects for mutually beneficial cooperation (Maher, 2019). The risk in taking the lead of alliances comprised of smaller, affluent, northern Member States, is that it might be perceived by others as a way to curb reforms benefitting southern states. With respect to EMU reforms, southern Member States, e.g. Spain, in particular under the government of Pedro Sánchez, also believe that previous agreements ought to be respected. Some argue that failure in persuading Spain to be a cosignatory of the Hanseatic letter was a missed opportunity (Korteweg, 2018).

It is worth exploring linkages beyond the own neighbourhood and northern portion of the continent. Austria, Slovenia, and Portugal have shown interest in the Netherlands, but do not enjoy reciprocity. Deepening relations with these, perhaps less traditional, allies, could be a first step to broaden the Netherlands' outreach in its renewed position in the EU. However, neither the LI nor constructivist theory predicts a Dutch approximation with states that do not share interests or identity as closely as others – with which the Netherlands does form coalitions – thus further validating their assumptions. Withal, the risk of being portrayed as the new UK in the EU does not do justice to its record as a pragmatic and constructive EU Member State. Completion of the single market could be a strong bridge to deepen contacts with central and eastern Europe, inasmuch as climate policy is not merely a priority in Denmark or Sweden, but also in Portugal.

6 Conclusion

This study was designed to determine the effect of Brexit on the position of the Netherlands in the EU. We obtained comprehensive results demonstrating that the Netherlands has become more assertive in its EU policy during the pre-Brexit phase, i.e. from the Brexit referendum in the UK on 23 June 2016 until the UK's formal withdrawal on 31 January 2020. Our work allows us to conclude the following.

First, the significance of the withdrawal of the UK from the EU is sizeable for the Netherlands. We found that the Netherlands is one of the EU Member States that stands out for having the highest exposure to Brexit. The Netherlands will be affected economically, but primarily, in terms of power dynamics within the Council of the European Union. In a post-Brexit Council, it will be harder for the Netherlands to block illiberal measures going against the liberalisation of global trade through broad trade agreements, the deepening of the common European market with equal access for all or the promotion of a well governed EU with efficient budgetary management.

Secondly, as a direct result of the loss of a heavyweight partner, we detected a growing shift in the EU narrative of Mark Rutte during the pre-Brexit phase. We have seen an increase in events in which the EU and the future of (the Netherlands in) the EU was explicitly addressed, whereas before there was an absence of a clear vision. Our discourse analysis demonstrated that Mark Rutte's views have changed, and 'Europe' has started to be addressed in a more positive light, a network of countries beyond a single market.

Thirdly, one of the more significant findings to emerge from this study is that the Netherlands has come to the fore and has undertaken an active leadership role in forging new coalitions to secure its interest in a post-Brexit EU. The search for alternative coalitions or new friends for the Netherlands started in 2017. A prime outcome of this is the New Hanseatic League, consisting of northern EU Member States. A second major finding is that the Netherlands equally seems to act as the leader of the Frugal Four, who cooperate primarily on budgetary related matters.

These findings draw on already existing literature stating that the Netherlands primarily partakes in ad-hoc, theme-specific coalitions. The New Hanseatic League and Frugal Four are examples of these. The results of this study show that, during the pre-Brexit phase, the Netherlands focused on and intensified diplomatic relations with already existing strong partnerships. However, cooperation with small, affluent, mostly northern Member States will

not suffice to counter a post-Brexit increased position of the Franco-German axis supporting deepening of EU integration. Therefore, opportunities for a renewed position of the Netherlands lie in fortifying its traditional role as a consensus-finding and pragmatic Member State. In this role the Netherlands could act as a bridge in the north-south divide by strengthening partnerships with less traditional partners. These may include large Member State Spain and smaller eastern and southern states, such as Portugal and Slovenia, that have shown interest in the Netherlands and share various policy viewpoints.

It is plausible that a number of limitations may have influenced the results obtained. Firstly, the number of respondents of the self-completion questionnaire was significantly lower than desired. Also, neither many practitioners (EU officials, diplomats, and government representatives), nor a variety of political affiliations were represented among the respondents. Therefore, we used the responses as a supplement to our study and not as our main source. Secondly, as the focus of the study was on the pre-Brexit phase, including several events taking place in the months after 31 January 2020 would have been beyond the scope of our study. However, these developments are inseparably related to investigating the role of the Netherlands as an EU Member State in a Brexit era and constitute an opportunity for future research.

In addition, further research could investigate voting patterns in a post-Brexit Council of the EU. Will the members of the Hanseatic League cooperate on a more regular basis and on a wider range of issues? Furthermore, in the run-up to the national elections in the Netherlands in 2021, it would be useful to examine whether the EU will be presented in an increasingly positive light, now that the UK has withdrawn, and if the more outspoken vision for Europe and EU policy will continue to be pursued. Lastly, recent statements by Dutch government officials have put diplomatic relations with the other (southern) states on the edge. It is worth exploring whether the position of the Netherlands in forming coalitions in the EU will be directly affected by this.

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Annexes

- Annex A: Open-ended Questionnaire - Informed Consent Form
- Annex B: Open-ended Questionnaire – Question Template
- Annex C: List of Respondents
- Annex D:
 - Response Respondent 1
 - Response Respondent 2
 - Response Respondent 3
 - Response Respondent 4 (original Dutch)
 - Response Respondent 4 (translated into English)

Annex A: Open-ended Questionnaire - Informed Consent Form

INFORMED CONSENT

The present study arises in the context of a master's dissertation underway at **ISCTE – University Institute of Lisbon**. This study concerns the position of the Netherlands in the Council of the EU regarding coalition-building and aims to generate insights into how the country's position in terms of policy impact and network centrality in Council negotiations has altered in response to Brexit.

The study is carried out by Jelle Floot (jfttee@iscte-iul.pt), who can be contacted in case of any questions or should you wish to share comments. Your participation, which is highly valued, consists of answering a few questions and could take around 30 minutes. You may at all times deviate from the original question by adding additional information that you consider important or relevant. There are no expected significant risks associated to participation in the study. Although you may not benefit directly from your participation in the study, your answers will be of great contribution to the student's master project and overall multiperspectivity regarding the subject.

Participation in this study is strictly **voluntary**: you can choose to participate or not to participate. If you choose to participate, you can stop your participation at any time without having to provide any justification. In addition to being voluntary, your participation is also **anonymous** and **confidential**. Therefore, you will be only asked to identify yourself through nationality and position at the start. The data for qualitative processing, meaning that answers will be analysed and reported individually. Your information will not be shared with any third parties.

In view of this information, please indicate if you accept participating in the study:

I ACCEPT

I DO NOT ACCEPT

Name: _____ Date: _____

Annex B: Open-ended Questionnaire – Questions Template

Open-ended questionnaire

Dear

Once again, I would like to thank you sincerely for partaking in this interview. I am curious as to your perspective, meaning that there are no right or wrong answers. Your data will be utilised as a complimentary supplement to my master's dissertation and, hence, not form the primary source of information.

On a separate note, I would like to wish good health and safety for you and your beloved ones amidst these times of Covid-19. Your contribution is highly valued.

Best wishes

Jelle Floot

Pre-Brexit phase: when referring to the 'pre-Brexit phase' during this interview, we refer to the period of time between the Brexit referendum in the UK (23 June 2016) to the formal withdrawal of the UK from the EU (31 January 2020).

Introductory questionnaire

1. Nationality
2. Professional position

The Netherlands in the Council of the EU in a Brexit era

1. Have you noticed any change in the Dutch agenda for the EU or stance towards the EU since the United Kingdom has announced to withdraw from the EU subsequent to their referendum on 23 June 2016?
2. If anything, in which (policy) area have you seen an alteration in the Netherland's behaviour in the Council of the EU during the pre-Brexit phase?
3. From your point of view, do you assume that, during the pre-Brexit phase, the Netherlands has taken an active role in reaching out to other Member States to form new or reinforce traditional coalitions, anticipating for a post-Brexit EU? If yes, of which Member States is this coalition / are these coalitions comprised?
4. Have you noticed any changes in German-Dutch and Franco-Dutch relations in EU context during the pre-Brexit phase?
5. Is there anything else you consider relevant or important to elaborate upon? If 'no', please leave answer open.

Annex C: List of Respondents

It should be noted that all respondents agreed to use their real positions for this dissertation. However, respondent 1, 2, and 3 wish to remain anonymous and respondent 4 agreed to use their real name.

Respondent	Nationality	Professional Position
1	British-Irish	Current Economics PhD researcher at the European University Institute. Former European Investment Bank and European Central Bank.
2	Belgian	Senior account executive in a Public Affairs and communications consultancy. Formerly employed at European Parliament.
3	Dutch	Researcher at Brussels-based consultancy. Previously trainee at among others the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the European Commission.
4	Dutch	Parliamentary leader and spokesperson 'European Affairs' of the political party 'D66' in the Dutch House of Representatives (Second Chamber).

Annex D: Responses Open-ended Questionnaire

Respondent 1	
Introductory questionnaire	
Nationality	<i>British-Irish</i>
Professional position	<i>Current Economics PhD researcher at the European University Institute. Former European Investment Bank and European Central Bank.</i>
The Netherlands in the Council of the EU in a Brexit era	
Have you noticed any change in the Dutch agenda for the EU or stance towards the EU since the United Kingdom has announced to withdraw from the EU subsequent to their referendum on 23 June 2016?	<i>The Dutch response to the initial Covid-19 'Eurobonds / Coronabonds' was quite notable. Initially they rejected the idea of issuing shared European Debt, which was aimed at helping countries like Italy during this crisis. That showed a distinct anti-EU feeling, in my opinion. To the extent in which it also was signalling the potential fall of the EU to some commentators during the stand-off. Whilst other countries (such as Germany, I think) also rejected to the euro-debt, it was interesting that the Netherlands were the face of saying "No" to Europe, rather than other countries which were also saying no.</i>
If anything, in which (policy) area have you seen an alteration in the Netherland's behaviour in the Council of the EU during the pre-Brexit phase?	<i>So as mentioned above in Question 1, I have seen a shift in policy w.r.t. their financial engagement with the EU. I have seen a negative stance towards debt sharing amongst EU member states. I think it's also notable to mention the different stance the Dutch government took towards Covid-19 in general. They went against the herd and followed their own public health guidance which was significantly more relaxed than the majority of the other EU countries. This is not in itself a bad thing, just notable that they did not seem to follow the 'EU approach'. In fact, one could even say that at the initial stages they followed a policy response to Covid pretty similar to the UK, highlighting their often strong similarities.</i>
From your point of view, do you assume that, during the pre-Brexit phase, the Netherlands has taken an active role in reaching out to other Member States to form new or reinforce traditional coalitions, anticipating for a post-Brexit EU? If yes, of which Member States is this coalition / are these coalitions comprised?	<i>I imagine they will aim to reinforce their already strong connection with Germany, however I think the number of countries which they could reach out to are rather limited. I do not think they have common goals or views with the Eastern bloc, nor with the very southern bloc. Perhaps Austria seems a good candidate, along with the Nordic countries.</i>
Have you noticed any changes in German-Dutch and Franco-Dutch relations in EU context during the pre-Brexit phase?	<i>Not educated on German-Dutch or Franco-Dutch relations. But would assume German-Dutch relations are pretty solid, based on trade and significant movement of people between the two countries for work and study etc.</i>
Is there anything else you consider relevant or important to elaborate upon? If 'no', please leave answer open.	<i>No.</i>

Respondent 2	
Introductory questionnaire	
Nationality	<i>Belgian</i>
Professional position	<i>Senior account executive in a Public Affairs and communications consultancy. Former EP.</i>
The Netherlands in the Council of the EU in a Brexit era	
Have you noticed any change in the Dutch agenda for the EU or stance towards the EU since the United Kingdom has announced to withdraw from the EU subsequent to their referendum on 23 June 2016?	<i>Yes, the Netherlands has taken a more leading role to ensure its perceived interests are well represented at EU-level. Its ambitions for the EU are less integrationist, particularly when it comes to fiscal matters, especially with regards to any mutualisation of debt. Previously, it could rely on a strong UK, which was a heavy weight in Policy- and decision-making. Overall, it could rely on the still-existing north-south divide, finding overall alignment with the German agenda. However, faced with rapidly changing national politics there is uncertainty on Germany's historic positions for the future and where it finds agreement with France as part of package deals, the Netherlands risks finding itself isolated.</i>
If anything, in which (policy) area have you seen an alteration in the Netherlands' behaviour in the Council of the EU during the pre-Brexit phase?	<i>In the debate on the post-COVID recovery, particularly with regards to the CRR quick-fix. Whereas, the Netherlands, under the leadership of a strong UK, would have been able to strongly oppose the postponement of measures on non-performing loans on request of particularly the southern Member States, it now more easily gives in to such measures. While the urgency of the COVID-19 crisis need to be taken into account, it seems unlikely that the Netherlands would have agreed if the UK were still there, especially given that some of the measures apply for a number of years, well beyond the COVID crisis.</i> <i>The Netherlands did speak out strongly against debt-mutualisation in the form of EU-bonds. Where it easily wiped such proposals off the table in the last mandate, this time it found itself isolated, and broadly named and shamed in public media for opposing such a proposal, consequently leading to a notable change in narrative, although not a significantly different material position.</i>
From your point of view, do you assume that, during the pre-Brexit phase, the Netherlands has taken an active role in reaching out to other Member States to form new or reinforce traditional coalitions, anticipating for a post-Brexit EU? If yes, of which Member States is this coalition / are these coalitions comprised?	<i>I do not have any insights into this.</i>
Have you noticed any changes in German-Dutch and Franco-Dutch relations in EU context during the pre-Brexit phase?	<i>Not specifically. The relationship must be different, given that Germany's power has proportionately increased significantly, but it is difficult to say. Most likely their alliance had become stronger when it comes to the North-South divide. However, where Germany aims for agreement with France on further EU-integration, the relationship may be more difficult, with the Netherlands looking for allies to mitigate such moves.</i>
Is there anything else you consider relevant or important to elaborate upon? If 'no', please leave answer open.	<i>As a country, it is noteworthy that the Netherlands can be quite unique when compared to other Member States. To give an example, it would strongly resist further EU integration on certain initiatives, such as the Common Consolidated Corporate Tax Base, which aims resolve perceived, large losses in tax income across the EU. On the other hand, it took a strong lead in an EU anti-money laundering approach, which supposedly would also touch upon Member State sovereignty. Also, it is noteworthy that it strongly supports its Commissioner from a party that is not in the national government, in areas where it may not even have progressive, integrationist views in national politics.</i>

Respondent 3	
Introductory questionnaire	
Nationality	<i>Dutch</i>
Professional position	<i>Researcher consultancy in Brussels. Previously trainee at among others Dutch Min. Foreign Affairs and European Commission.</i>
The Netherlands in the Council of the EU in a Brexit era	
Have you noticed any change in the Dutch agenda for the EU or stance towards the EU since the United Kingdom has announced to withdraw from the EU subsequent to their referendum on 23 June 2016?	<i>No, as I am working on external aid I have not noticed any difference with regards to extra funding becoming available for development cooperation from the Netherlands – where the European Development Fund will become smaller with the absence of the UK's contribution. However, as the European Development Fund is partly funded by individual member states it could be that there will be a change in the next MFF. Solely on the political agenda I have not noticed a difference in this perspective.</i>
If anything, in which (policy) area have you seen an alteration in the Netherlands' behaviour in the Council of the EU during the pre-Brexit phase?	<i>During a meeting with the Dutch COREPER II early 2019, I have had a discussion on the Friends of Cohesion and the Frugals (the latter being Austria, Denmark, the Netherlands and Sweden). Obviously, the UK is not part of either and thus does not form part of any of these alliances when it comes to certain topics. Of course, the MFF negotiation game changed drastically since it became clear the UK was leaving, but this definitely has had an effect on the position of the Netherlands within the Frugals as I can imagine it would have otherwise been a group of 5 MS.</i>
From your point of view, do you assume that, during the pre-Brexit phase, the Netherlands has taken an active role in reaching out to other Member States to form new or reinforce traditional coalitions, anticipating for a post-Brexit EU? If yes, of which Member States is this coalition / are these coalitions comprised?	<i>Please see previous question on the coalition in the shaping of the next MFF. I am not aware of other coalitions in specific councils etc.</i>
Have you noticed any changes in German-Dutch and Franco-Dutch relations in EU context during the pre-Brexit phase?	<i>No, this is not something I follow.</i>
Is there anything else you consider relevant or important to elaborate upon? If 'no', please leave answer open.	<i>No.</i>

Respondent 4 Rob Jetten (original in Dutch)	
Inleidende vragen	
Naam	<i>Rob Jetten</i>
Nationaliteit	<i>Nederlandse</i>
Bedrijf / instelling, afdeling / functie	<i>Europa woordvoerder D66 Tweede Kamerfractie</i>
Nederland in de Raad van de Europese Unie in een Brexit-tijdperk	
Is er, volgens u, enige verandering opgetreden in de Nederlandse agenda voor de EU of standpunt tegenover de EU sinds het Verenigd Koninkrijk heeft aangegeven de EU te verlaten na het EU-referendum in het VK op 23 Juni 2016?	<i>We zien over het algemeen een positievere houding van Nederlanders tov de EU, nu veel mensen de nadelen van een vertrek zien. Het Nederlands kabinet ziet, naast de grote nadelen van de Brexit, ook kansen voor de Nederlandse positie. Daarom wordt er geïnvesteerd in relaties met andere Europese landen, voor het smeden van nieuwe coalities.</i>
Op welk (beleids-)gebied heeft u verandering in Nederlands gedrag in de Raad van de EU gezien gedurende de pre-Brexit-fase?	<i>We zien een stevigere inzet op het EMU-dossier, zie de hanzeliga (met ook niet-Euro lidstaten). Om stevigere tegenhang te bieden tegen voorstellen van oa Frankrijk, waar normaal het VK ook een duidelijke rol had in het tegenhangen mbt verdere integratie. Idem als het gaat over de Europese meerjarenbegroting (zie de "frugal four").</i>
Beschouwt u dat, gedurende de pre-Brexit-fase, Nederland een actieve rol heeft aangenomen aangaande het uitreiken naar andere EU-lidstaten om nieuwe coalities te vormen dan wel traditionele coalities te versterken, vooruitlopend op een post-Brexit EU-situatie waarin het VK geen lidstaat meer zal zijn? Zo ja, uit welke lidstaten bestaat deze coalities/ bestaan deze coalities?	<i>Ja. De Hanze liga is daar een voorbeeld van. Idem de frugal four. Maar ook niet alleen maar tegenhangen: we zien ook een progressieve groene coalitie met landen als Frankrijk en Spanje bijvoorbeeld. Samenwerking rondom plasticpact (Van Veldhoven en FR), maar recent ook een voorstel voor meer afspraken over klimaat in handelsakkoorden tussen Kaag en haar Franse counterpart.</i>
Heeft u tijdens de pre-Brexit-fase enige veranderingen in de Duits-Nederlandse en Frans-Nederlandse betrekkingen in EU-verband opgemerkt?	<i>NL-DL was al zeer goede relatie. NL-FR lijkt geïntensiveerd. Of daar een causaal verband te trekken is (vanwege Brexit) kan ik niet zeggen.</i>
Is er nog iets dat u relevant of belangrijk acht om toe te voegen? Indien 'nee', laat het antwoord dan alstublieft open.	

Respondent 4 Rob Jetten (translated into English)	
Introductory questionnaire	
Name	<i>Rob Jetten</i>
Nationality	<i>Dutch</i>
Company / institution, department / position	<i>Parliamentary leader and spokesperson 'European Affairs' of the political party 'D66' in the Dutch House of Representatives (Second Chamber)</i>
The Netherlands in the Council of the EU in a Brexit era	
Have you noticed any change in the Dutch agenda for the EU or stance towards the EU since the United Kingdom has announced to withdraw from the EU subsequent to their referendum on 23 June 2016?	<i>In general, we see a more positive attitude of the Dutch towards the EU, now that many people see the disadvantage of leaving. In addition to the major drawbacks of Brexit, the Dutch cabinet also sees opportunities for the Dutch position. That is why investments in relations with other European countries to forge new coalitions are being made.</i>
If anything, in which (policy) area have you seen an alteration in the Netherland's behaviour in the Council of the EU during the pre-Brexit phase?	<i>We see a stronger commitment to the EMU file, see the hanzeliga (including non-Euro member states). To provide a stronger counterpart to proposals from France, among others, where normally the UK also had a clear role in countering further integration. Ditto when it comes to the European multi-year budget (see the "frugal four").</i>
From your point of view, do you assume that, during the pre-Brexit phase, the Netherlands has taken an active role in reaching out to other Member States to form new or reinforce traditional coalitions, anticipating for a post-Brexit EU? If yes, of which Member States is this coalition / are these coalitions comprised?	<i>Yes. The Hanseatic League is an example of this. Ditto the frugal four. But also, not just counterparts: we also see a progressive green coalition with countries such as France and Spain, for example. Collaboration on the plastic pact (Van Veldhoven and FR), but also recently a proposal for more agreements on climate in trade agreements between Kaag and her French counterpart.</i>
Have you noticed any changes in German-Dutch and Franco-Dutch relations in EU context during the pre-Brexit phase?	<i>NL-DE was already a very good relationship. NL-FR appears to have intensified. I cannot say whether a causal relationship can be drawn there (because of Brexit).</i>
Is there anything else you consider relevant or important to elaborate upon? If 'no', please leave answer open.	