

# **Cleavages and rationality: patterns of coalition-building in the Council of Ministers of the European Union\***

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**Abstract.** This study analyzes roll call voting in the Council of Ministers from December 2003 to May 2019 in order to identify the factors that determine the strategies of coalition behavior of 28 EU Member States. The analysis makes possible to single out two important cleavages affecting the coalitional preferences of the Ministers of states. The first cleavage is observed between the EU members from Eastern and Western Europe. The second cleavage is associated with the duration of the countries' EU membership. The rationalistic intentions of member countries related to the agenda of the Council and their ideological preferences also influence the process of coalition formation and allow the EU states to go beyond the geographic and 'temporal' cleavages.

**Keywords:** coalition-building, roll call voting, Council of Ministers, cleavages, voting preferences.

## **Introduction**

The Council of Ministers of the European Union (Council) annually votes on several hundred acts that regulate various areas of the EU politics and affect the lives of hundreds of millions of the EU citizens. Unlike the European Commission and the European Parliament, the Council represents the interests of national states, and the system of qualified majority voting (QMV) is in the core of the decision-making within this institution. These two facts determine the strong dependence of the decision-making process on the preferences and voting strategies adopted by the representatives of Member States, i.e. Ministers of states. Previous studies have found that the EU countries tend to create coalitions in order to take a stronger position in the discussion of the Council agenda ([Aguilar-Fernández, 1994](#); [Lampinen & Uusikylä, 1998](#); [Haverland, 2000](#)). Still there is no consensus on the reasons for this kind of coalition behavior.

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I study various factors that influence the formation of coalitions within the Council of Ministers using the roll call voting data for the period from December 2003 to May 2019. A cross-group and cross-country comparison of dispersions of the rate of participation in contesting coalitions, reveals the existence of the geographic cleavage between Eastern and Western Europe, which correlates with the cleavage between the EU-15 and the countries that joined the EU after 2004. To validate the results of the dispersions' comparison and check the significance of other factors, I conduct a regression analysis. The results of the analysis demonstrate that the coalition behavior of Member States is affected by two basic cleavages: geographical and 'temporal' cleavage between Western and Eastern Europe. In addition, when forming coalitions, countries are guided by rational patterns of behavior associated with the desire to reduce the normative and structural costs of adopting (or not adopting) the discussed legal acts and their ideological preferences.

The structure of the paper is as follows. The first section is devoted to a review of existing research on the subject. In the second section, I describe the specifics of the used data. In the third section, I highlight the main contesting coalitions that could be observed in the Council of Ministers from December 2003 to May 2019. In the fourth section I conduct a cross-group and cross-country comparison of dispersions of the rate of participation in contesting coalitions using the Levene's test. The fifth section is devoted to the regression analysis. The sixth section summarizes the results of the analysis.

## **State of the art**

Since the mid-1990s, the Council of Ministers of the European Union has been the focus of the research on patterns of coalition behavior. While a number of authors use the logic of rational choice to justify the coalition constellations of the Ministers of States ([Winkler, 1998](#); [Lewis, 2003](#); [Kaeding & Selck, 2005](#)), other researchers insist that these actors make a decision on joining or not joining a certain coalition, having social norms, ideology and cultural preferences as a priority ([Johnston, 1995](#); [Elgström et al, 2001](#); [Hagemann & Hoyland, 2008](#)). However, the generally recognized consensus is that coalition behavior within the Council is primarily determined by the national identity of its veto actors ([Sherrington, 2000](#); [Mattila & Lane, 2001](#); [Hayes-Renshaw et al., 2006](#)).

As Beyers and Dierickx (1997: 440) note, the Council of Ministers is the most “nationalized” institution of the European Union.

The literature of the last 20 years offers several answers to the question about the principles of forming coalitions in the framework of the Council of Ministers. Some authors (König & Bräuninger, 2004; Zimmer et al., 2005; Kaeding & Selck, 2005; Mattila, 2009; Plechanovová, 2013) promote the idea of the *geographical* nature of cleavages in the Council. Until the early 2000s, the idea of a north-south cleavage, which determines the coalition behavior of the Member States in the Council of Ministers, was in the core of this block of literature. Arts and Dickson (2004) refer countries such as Greece, Spain, Italy and Portugal to the “southern” coalition, placing all other EU-15 countries in the rival group. After the 2004 enlargement, the “southern” coalition replenished with Cyprus and Malta (Plechanovová, 2011). Nevertheless, already in the mid-2000s, scholars were gradually moving away from the south-north dichotomy. At first, the dual model was substituted by the south-north-east division (Kaeding & Selck, 2005; Plechanovová, 2011). Recently the authors stress the existence of two geographical cleavages: “south-north” and “west-east” (Goetz, 2005; Mattila, 2009; Clark & Jones, 2011). Based on this block of literature, I put forward the first four hypotheses of this study:

*H1. If a country is located in Eastern Europe, it seeks to join a coalition with states of this region.*

*H2. If a country is located in Western Europe, it seeks to join a coalition with states of this region.*

*H3. If a country is located in Northern Europe, it seeks to join a coalition with states of this region.*

*H4. If a country is located in Southern Europe, it seeks to join a coalition with states of this region.*

No less influential is the theoretical perspective, indicating the lines of division in the Council of Ministers on the principle of *power*. Peterson (1995) and Tallberg (2002) show that the most economically developed EU countries, i.e. Germany, France and the United Kingdom, form “hubs of power” within the Council of Ministers and attract smaller states to strengthen their bargaining position. This approach allows the EU leaders to gain more power within the Council, while small countries get guarantees of changing or not changing the current status quo and loyalty from the bigger players of the EU politics. The theory of “hubs of power” allows to formulate the fifth hypothesis:

*H5. The bigger the economic strength and influence of the country, the more likely it is in a coalition with smaller states.*

The third group of authors explains the principle of coalition-building in the Council through the prism of *goodness of fit* ([Börzel et al., 2007](#); [Steunenberg & Toshkov, 2009](#); [Sager & Thomann, 2018](#)). According to their logic, the representatives of the states, which may incur potentially big costs due to the need to bring national legislation in line with supranational norms, join a coalition to block the positive vote on this legislation. Jordan and Lenschow (2000) empirically confirm this theoretical logic, citing as an example the Council vote for new regulations in the field of environmental policy. Meunier (2000), to illustrate the goodness of fit argument, cites three rounds of voting for a trade agreement with the United States. The sixth hypothesis is as follows:

*H6. The less the state's legislation complies with the Council agenda, the more the state is inclined to join the coalition opposing this agenda.*

Some students of the EU institutions claim that coalition-building in the Council of Ministers is *ideologically* driven ([Hagemann & Hoyland, 2008](#); [Mattila, 2009](#); [Hayes-Renshaw, 2017](#)). The basic right-left continuum that Mattila (2009) used to test this argument was supplemented by Häge (2012), who added greater variability to the ideological spectrum of the analyzed ruling parties in the EU-27. In turn, Moury (2011) discovered a strong relationship between the affiliation of the ruling party of the EU Member State in the European Parliament and the *modus operandi* of the representative of this country in the Council of Ministers. The following hypothesis comes from this theoretical perspective:

*H7. If the country's ruling party adheres to leftist views, Minister of the state seeks to create a coalition with the Ministers of states where the ruling parties hold similar views (similarly for another part of the ideological spectrum).*

The latter perspective highlights the *duration* of a country's EU membership as a core for contesting coalitions. Zimmer *et al.* (2005: 415) note that the countries of the "new" Europe, despite the lack of a homogeneous political and ideological agenda, tend to "stick together" when it comes to voting in the Council. In turn, Mattila (2008) concludes that the countries that joined the European Union in 2004 instantly adapted to the institutional decision-making mechanics of the EU institutions, and worked out its own strategy for confronting the EU-15

states while forming and voting for the common agenda. The last hypothesis is formulated as follows:

*H8. If a country joined the EU in 2004 or later, it seeks to create a coalition with the “new” EU members.*

In the context of the existing research on the topic, it is worth noting both qualitative and quantitative attempts to measure the preferences of the Ministers of States and understand the logic of coalition-building. Most qualitative research is based on expert interviews (e.g., [Lewis, 2003](#); [Zimmer et al, 2005](#); [Clark & Jones, 2011](#)). In some studies, qualitative data is complemented by quantitative interpretation. For example, the data of the Decision-Making in the European Union (DEU) research project, containing an interpretation of hundreds of semi-structured interviews with the EU experts, is actively used to test various theoretical models related to the bargaining process within the Council of Ministers (e.g., [Lewis, 2005](#); [Naurin & Wallace, 2008](#)). In turn, quantitative research, for the most part, is based on roll call voting data ([Mattila & Lane, 2001](#); [Heisenberg, 2005](#); [Hayes-Renshaw et al., 2006](#); [Mattila, 2008](#); [Hagemann, 2008](#); [Mattila, 2009](#)). The major part of these studies demonstrate that explicit voting in the Council of Ministers is deviant and when it does occur “it is typically only one Member State that is contesting the proposal” ([Mattila, 2009](#): 842). However, a series of studies that focus on examining cases where consensus was not reached reveals key patterns of coalition behavior. [Mattila \(2009\)](#), having analyzed 416 cases of roll call voting for legal acts from May 2004 to December 2006, concludes that coalition behavior in the Council is determined by the cleavages along the north-south and west-east dimensions. In turn, [Hayes-Renshaw et al. \(2006\)](#) collects a wider set of 2,153 cases of roll call voting and make a conclusion about the importance of the ideological factor in the formation of contesting coalitions. [Hagemann \(2008\)](#) highlights goodness of fit as a rationalized intention to create coalitions within the Council of Ministers.

The next section describes the specifics of the roll call voting database used for this study. It includes the discussion of the advantages and disadvantages of using this data for analyzing coalition strategies in the Council of Ministers. In the empirical part of the paper, I check the validity of five theoretical explanations of coalition behavior in the Council that are discussed above.

## Data

The analysis of roll call voting data is based on the information released by the Council Secretariat, which is available on the portal of the Council of Ministers.<sup>1</sup> To compile the database, I used the documents located in the “Monthly Summary of Council Acts” section. They include a description of voting procedures for all legislative and non-legislative acts, including the information on the voting choices of the Member States’ representatives: “for”, “against” or abstention. The database includes roll call voting data for 28 countries from December 2003 to May 2019. This time period is due to the necessity to check for potential fluctuations and changes in general voting trends in the Council of Ministers after the enlargements of 2004, 2007 and 2013.

*Table 1.* Contested legislative acts and other acts, which have passed the voting procedure in the Council of Ministers of the European Union, December 2003 – May 2019 (percentages)

	Legislative acts	Other acts	Total
Uncontested	83.3 (1,892)	90.6 (4,171)	86.9 (6,063)
Abstentions	4.9 (112)	3.1 (143)	4.0 (255)
Negative votes	11.8 (267)	6.3 (289)	9.1 (556)
Total	100 (2,271)	100 (4,603)	100 (6,874)

During the analyzed period of time, the Council of Ministers voted on 6,874 acts, of which 2,271 are legislative acts and 4,603 are other acts. Of the last, 34% are decisions, 32% are regulations, 12% are directives and the remaining 12% are decisions that do not belong to the above mentioned three groups. Of all the acts discussed, 27% are related to Agriculture and Fisheries, 19% to Economic and Financial Affairs, 12% to Foreign Affairs and security policy, 9% to Environment, 7% to Energy, 6% to Transport, 20% to other policy areas. Following Hagemann (2007) and Mattila (2009), I measure contesting coalitions in the number of countries that choose to abstain from voting on a particular

*Table 2. Contested acts by policy area, which have passed the voting procedure in the Council of Ministers of the European Union, December 2003 – May 2019 (percentages)*

	Agriculture and Fisheries	Economic and Financial Affairs	Foreign Affairs and security policy	Environment	Energy	Transport	Other
Uncontested	80.9 (1,502)	87.1 (1,138)	90.7 (748)	76.5 (472)	92.4 (444)	89.8 (372)	88.3 (1,214)
Abstentions	5.3 (98)	2.3 (30)	1.9 (16)	8.6 (53)	0.5 (2)	5.9 (24)	3.5 (48)
Negative votes	13.8 (256)	10.6 (138)	7.4 (61)	14.9 (92)	7.1 (35)	4.3 (18)	8.2 (113)
Total	100 (1,856)	100 (1,306)	100 (825)	100 (617)	100 (481)	100 (414)	100 (1,375)

issue or vote against it. The next section provides a description of the main contesting coalitions that were identified in the framework of the analysis.

Using roll call data to measure contesting coalitions has its obvious drawbacks. As Mattila (2009: 843) rightly claims, the motives for two or more countries to vote equally for a particular agenda might differ radically. Equal vote does not mean that there is a coalition created on the basis of ideological or rational preferences. In order to partially solve this problem and identify some additional voting trends in the Council of Ministers, I introduce proxy variables related to the basic normative and structural characteristics of the EU countries and check their influence on the dynamics of voting on acts connected to various EU policies. The second drawback of collecting roll call data on the basis of Council documents is that the analyzed documents do not include information about the voting procedures that failed due to the lack of quorum. The lack of this data, however, is not critical and does not violate the validity of the results, since tracking the creation of coalitions is only possible *post factum* that is after the end of the voting procedure.

The use of roll call voting data for analyzing coalition behavior in the Council of Ministers has its undeniable advantages over other types of data. Firstly, roll call voting data is quite easy to collect, since all the necessary documents are publicly available on the portal of the Council of Ministers (at the moment, data is available from 1999 to 2019). Secondly, documents have a standard structure and a single format, which allows to simplify and automate the collection of necessary information using special programming tools.<sup>2</sup>

## **Contesting coalitions in the Council of Ministers**

The late 1990s and early 2000s were marked by a sharp increase in the number of studies predicting an increase in imbalance and conflict potential in the Council of Ministers. Johnston (1995), Tsebelis and Garrett (1996) and Hosli (1999) linked these negative trends with the large expansion of the European Union in 2004 and the inability of the new member countries to adapt to the voting culture within the Council. A similar position was expressed by Banchoff and Smith (2005), who emphasized that the “national” identity of the new member countries from Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) prevailed over pan-European values and aspirations. Thus, after 2004, 2007 and 2013, one could



expect a sharp increase in the number of contesting coalitions, divided primarily by geographical cleavages. However, as Tables 1 and 2 demonstrate, the majority of acts in the Council of Ministers are adopted unanimously (86.9% of all acts), and a rather large share of acts is adopted using the qualified majority voting (7.4% of all acts). At the same time, it is possible to single out specific policy areas, which become the reason for the split of the Council: Agriculture (unanimous vote in 80.9% of cases) and Ecology (unanimous vote in 76.5% of cases). Nevertheless, in general, these trends are not deviant and fully correspond to the voting patterns that were observed in the Council of Ministers until 2004, that is, before the active expansion of the European Union to the East ([Hagemann, 2007](#); [Mattila, 2008](#); [Mattila, 2009](#)).

The reasons for the lack of a “big split” ([Petrakos, 2013](#)) between the West and the East of the European Union are explained by researchers in different ways. Some authors say that the multi-stage procedure for the adoption of new Member States from Eastern and Central Europe has helped them to adapt more easily to the “consensus” decision-making culture in the EU institutions and, in particular, in the Council of Ministers (e.g. [Field, 2001](#)). Another block of researchers emphasizes the rationalistic component of behavior of the new members of the Council of Ministers. Most of the states that joined the EU in 2004-2013 are not big political and economic players. Thereby, it is much easier for them to follow in the wake of the major EU players than to organize resistance to the current agenda (e.g., [Falkner et al., 2004](#)). Finally, [Ray \(2003\)](#), [De Vreese and Boomgarden \(2006\)](#) and [Alexandrova et al. \(2016\)](#) emphasize the importance of public opinion in the new EU Member States: the institutions of the European Union have more authority than national political institutions for the majority of the population of these countries. In this regard, new EU members always take into account the pro-European sentiment of their population, before taking a position that is contrary to the decision of the majority of the EU states.

Thus, the EU accession of 10 countries of Central and Eastern Europe in 2004, Bulgaria and Romania in 2007 and Croatia in 2013 as a whole did not change the traditional voting trends within the Council of Ministers. Nevertheless, in order to test the hypothesis about the effect of the enlargements on the voting and the formation of contesting coalitions in the Council, I compare the dispersions of the rate of participation in contesting coalitions of the EU-15 countries and the CEE Member

States. The comparison of variances is carried out using the Levene's test, since this test is more stable than the F-test or the Bartlett test when comparing samples where the distribution differs from normal ([Brown & Forsythe, 1974](#): 364-367).

Mattila (2004) and Hayes-Renshaw *et al.* (2006) demonstrate that, on average, northern countries and big states tend to vote against or abstain from voting in the Council of Ministers more often than southern states and smaller countries. The analysis as a whole confirms these conclusions. Between December 2003 and May 2019, the largest number of contested votes in the Council of Ministers came from the northern countries: Sweden, Finland, the Netherlands and Denmark. Such big states as Germany, Italy and the United Kingdom, also abstained from voting or voted against the agenda quite often. The EU members from Central and Eastern Europe, on the contrary, were inclined to support the initiatives under discussion. At the same time, the basic background of a relatively small number of negative votes and abstentions from CEE Member States, contains Hungary, Latvia and Lithuania as deviant cases, which are among the ten EU countries with the largest share of negative votes and abstentions.

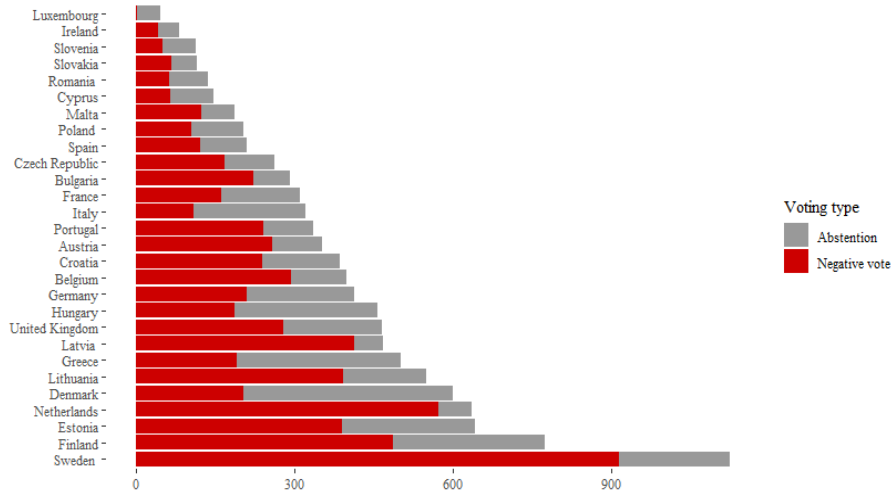


Figure 1. Contesting voting in the Council of Ministers of the European Union, December 2003 – May 2019 (total, per country).

Studies based on roll call voting data with a short-term observation period indicate an important trend: more than half of all contesting coalitions contain only one member state that votes against the agenda

(Hayes-Renshaw et al., 2006; Mattila, 2009). The study of roll call voting in the Council of Ministers from December 2003 to May 2019 confirms the results of the earlier studies: the average annual share of contesting coalitions with one member state for the period under review is 56.6%. Then come the coalitions comprising 2 and 3 member countries: their average annual share is 18.2% and 13.4%, respectively. The rarest contesting coalitions include more than 5 members, their average annual share for the analyzed period is less than 4%.

The most important question in the discussion about the size and formation frequency of contesting coalitions, is about the reasons that encourage countries to form such coalitions and the logic of choosing partners for upholding a specific position during the voting procedure. As part of the regression analysis, I try to answer this question. However, before proceeding to the construction of a multivariate regression model, it seems important to verify the assumption about the different nature of coalitional behavior in the EU-15 countries and the states that joined the European Union as a result of the 2004-2013 enlargements. To compare the variances of these two samples, I use the Levene's test.

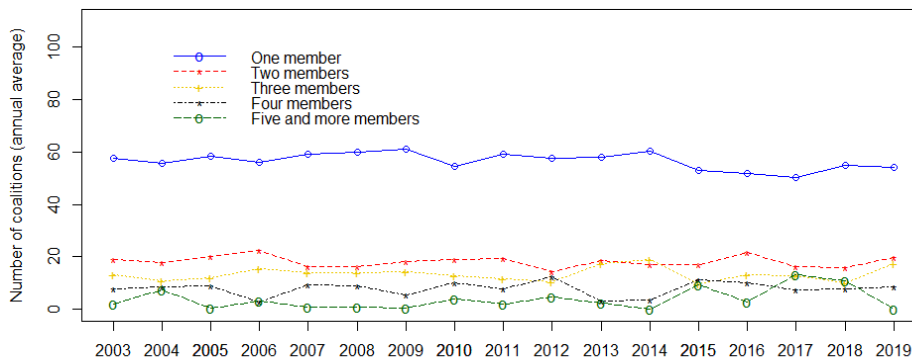


Figure 2. Contesting coalitions in the Council of Ministers of the European Union, December 2003 – May 2019 (annual average).

### Contesting coalitions: does geography and time matter?

In order to test the hypotheses about the influence of geography and time on the formation of contesting coalitions in the Council of Ministers, I analyze (1) cross-country differentiation of the rate of participation in contesting coalitions and (2) cross-group differentiation of the rate of

participation in contesting coalitions. The rate of participation in contesting coalitions shows how many times per month a country voted the same way with another states(s) against the Council agenda or abstained from voting.

First, it is necessary to test the assumption claiming that the EU Member States tend to form coalitions on the basis of duration of their membership. An analysis of cross-country differentiation demonstrates an important trend. The dispersion of the rate of participation in contesting coalitions does not have statistically significant differences (Levene’s test,  $p < 0.001$ ) in 10 out of 15 countries of the EU-15. In practice this means that these states can be often found in coalitions of the same size and same consistency (see Figure 5). In turn, the dispersion in the cases of Denmark, Finland, the Netherlands, Sweden and the UK is statistically different from the base trend for the EU-15 (Levene’s test,  $p < 0.001$ ). In the previous section, these countries were identified as the most active in terms of contested voting. This explains the statistical difference between the dispersions of these countries and other EU-15 states: Denmark, Finland, the Netherlands, Sweden and the UK as a whole participate in more contesting coalitions than other states of “old” Europe.

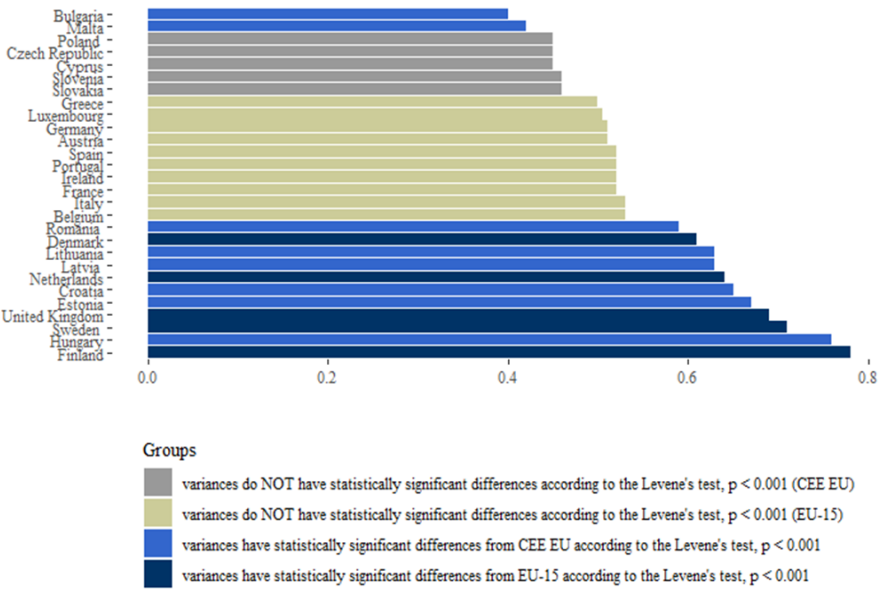


Figure 3. Variances of the rate of participation in contesting coalitions in the European Union countries, December 2003 – May 2019.

In turn, the group of new EU Member States demonstrates more variability. The dispersions of Czech Republic, Cyprus, Poland, Slovenia and Slovakia show no statistically significant differences. On average, these countries are the members of the same coalitions in 9.8% of cases (see Figure 5). In turn, Hungary and Croatia are the most differentiated countries in terms of participation in coalitions: both states have shown the coalition-building activity, which is comparable to similar indicators of the leaders of EU-15. Moderate differentiation, which nevertheless differs from the basic trend for the “new” EU countries, is observed in Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta and Romania.

Deviant cases in the groups of “old” and “new” EU countries also do not fit into the logic of geographical dimensions “north-south” and “west-east”. Dispersions of all countries except Sweden ( $\sigma^2 = 0.71$ ), have statistically significant differences from the average dispersions of the analyzed groups: Western Europe ( $\sigma^2 = 0.55$ ), Eastern Europe ( $\sigma^2 = 0.52$ ), Northern Europe ( $\sigma^2 = 0.70$ ) and Southern Europe ( $\sigma^2 = 0.49$ ). Thus, the logic of the coalition behavior of 11 EU Member States goes beyond the explanatory abilities of theories that determine the coalition preferences of the EU Member States through the lens of their geographical position and duration of their EU membership.

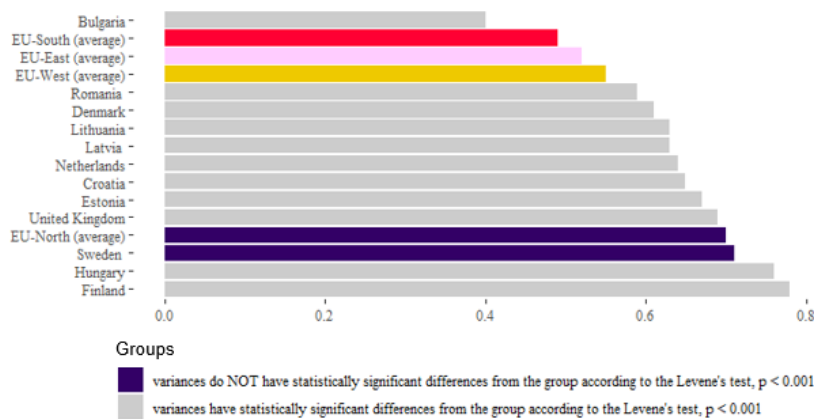


Figure 4. Variances of the rate of participation in contesting coalitions in the European Union geographical groups, December 2003 – May 2019.

Figure 5 summarizes the information on the coalition preferences of the EU Member States in the Council of Ministers. Based on roll call voting data for the period from December 2003 to May 2019, I identified 4

statistically significant nuclear coalitions that include 5 or more members ( $p < 0.05$ ). In the figure, they are indicated by circles. The frequency of formation of these nuclear coalitions is indicated by the sign  $\bar{Y}$ . The most frequent nuclear coalition is the coalition between Austria, Greece, Lithuania, Spain and Portugal ( $\bar{Y} = 0.23$ ). Each circle is divided into sectors, which contain one to three EU Member States. These sectors are essentially mini-coalitions within nuclear coalitions. In each sector, one can observe the frequency of getting into this sectoral coalition, which is indicated by the sign  $\hat{Y}$  ( $p < 0.05$ ). The most often sectoral coalitions are between such countries as the Netherlands and Denmark ( $\hat{Y} = 0.34$ ), Greece and Spain ( $\hat{Y} = 0.31$ ), Austria, Portugal and Lithuania ( $\hat{Y} = 0.29$ ) and Finland and Sweden ( $\hat{Y} = 0.34$ ). Luxembourg, Ireland and Malta are not members of any of the nuclear and sectoral coalitions: their participation in coalition activities within the Council of Ministers is sporadic, and these states do not have stable coalition partners (at  $p < 0.05$ ).

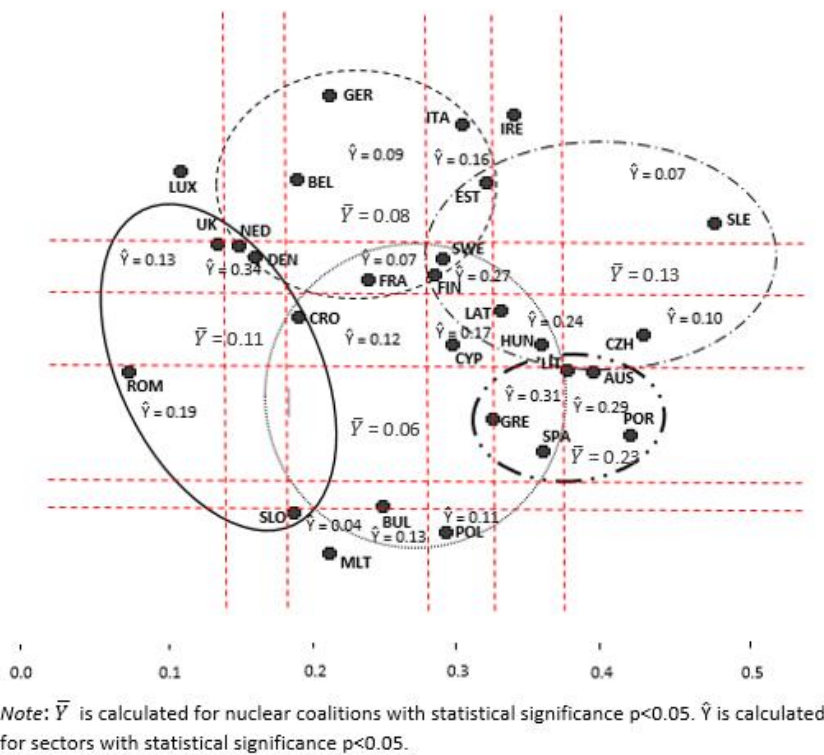


Figure 5. Nuclear and sectoral coalitions in the Council of Ministers of the European Union, December 2003 – May 2019.

The majority of the countries that are at the junction of nuclear coalitions are the same countries that were previously identified as the most active in terms of contested voting: Croatia, Denmark, Estonia, Greece, Hungary, Finland, France, Latvia, Spain and Sweden. Being at the junction means a country's readiness to go beyond the limits of one nuclear coalition to defend its interests related to the agenda. In this regard, Finland and Sweden are the most independent from the nuclear coalitions. For the observed period of time these two states were part of sectoral coalitions with the representatives of three nuclear coalitions. Thus, the assumptions about the importance of geographical ([König & Bräuninger, 2004](#); [Kaeding & Selck, 2005](#); [Plechanovová, 2013](#)) and 'temporal' ([Zimmer et al., 2005](#); [Mattila, 2004](#); [Mattila, 2008](#)) determinants for coalition behavior within the Council of Ministers found only partial empirical evidence. On the one hand, in the period from 2003 to 2019, about half of the EU-28 countries replicated the same coalition behavior, which, in most cases, led to the fact that these countries were included in the same sectoral and nuclear coalitions. In turn, the second half of the EU countries was not so predictable in their coalition strategies. Such countries as Hungary, Sweden and the United Kingdom, actively participated in coalitions of various sizes and composition. Other states, such as Ireland and Malta preferred to create one member coalitions, and participated in coalitions with other Member States only situationally. At the same time, at this stage of the analysis, it is not possible to determine how much the coalition behavior of those countries, which dispersions of the rate of participation in contesting coalitions do not have statistically significant differences from the average indicators of their geographical and 'temporal' groups is really determined by factors of geography and duration of membership, rather than other interfering variables. The regression analysis presented in the next section gives a more accurate answer to the question of the importance of belonging to a certain geographical group and the time of EU accession for the formation of contesting coalitions within the Council of Ministers.

## **Regression analysis**

In this section, I conduct a regression analysis to identify the main predictors of the coalition behavior of the EU Member States within the Council of Ministers. The results of the regression analysis serve two

purposes. First, it is important to verify the validity of the conclusions regarding the geographical and ‘temporal’ determinants that were made in the previous section. Second, it is necessary to identify the significance of other observed factors: (1) the influence of “hubs of power”, (2) goodness of fit and (3) ideological preferences. In all models, the rate of the country's participation in contesting coalitions (per month) acts as a dependent variable.

Table 3 presents 5 statistical models. Each model is devoted to a certain factor described above. Model 1 includes 5 variables that are related to the geographical position of the Member States and the duration of their EU membership. The geographical position of a country is measured using data on the distance between the capital of the state and Brussels and the country's affiliation to a specific geographical region: Western Europe, Eastern Europe, Northern Europe and Southern Europe. To reflect the time dimension, I use a dummy variable, which indicates whether a country has joined the European Union after 2004. The results of Model 1 make it possible to single out the main geographic-temporal cleavage in the Council of Ministers. The variables reflecting the geographical position for the groups of Eastern and Western Europe turned out to be significant ( $p < 0.05$ ), as well as the dummy variable for the new EU Member States ( $p < 0.001$ ). Thus, the assumption that the “new” and “old” member countries seek to unite in coalitions on a geographical basis within the borders of Eastern and Western Europe, has found an empirical evidence. A similar trend for the countries of Northern and Southern Europe was not found: the variables for these geographical regions are insignificant. In general, the results of Model 1 confirm the conclusions of the analysis in the previous section.

Model 2 is devoted to testing the hypothesis about the influence of “hubs of power” on the coalition-building in the Council of Ministers. In this model, the power of the state is measured using indicators of GDP, the size of the territory, the presidency of the Council (dummy variable) and the share of the country's contributions to the budget of the European Union. Data for all described indicators are provided by Eurostat. In addition, the model includes a dummy variable indicating whether the country is a member of the G7. The only significant variable that measures the “hubs of power” is Presidency of the Council ( $p < 0.05$ ). Despite the fact that the results of the regression analysis do not allow to draw reasonable conclusions about the importance of “hubs of power” in



the context of the coalition-building in the Council, the factor of the influence of the presidency on the coalition preferences undoubtedly requires a deeper study. Important steps in this direction have already been taken by Naurin and Wallace (2008) and Häge (2013).

Model 3 includes the variables that demonstrate the compliance of countries with norms affecting specific EU policies. In turn, Model 4 contains the variables that relate to the basic structural characteristics of the EU countries. This separation is important in order to understand how much the coalition behavior of countries is determined by the factors of compliance and objective structural predictors. In these models, I concentrate on the main policy areas that most frequently were on the agenda during the observed period: Agriculture and Fisheries, Economic and Financial Affairs, Foreign Affairs and security policy, Environment, Energy and Transport. Normative compliance of the EU member states is often measured using the data on the infringement procedures, which are launched by the European Commission against those countries that violate the European Union law (e.g., Tallberg, 2002; Börzel et al., 2005; Hofmann, 2018). Data on infringement cases for each of the areas of policy<sup>3</sup> is based on the Berlin infringement database (Börzel & Knoll, 2012), which was supplemented by the Annual reports on monitoring the application of EU law, which are published by the European Commission. Variables reflecting the structural characteristics of member countries are encoded using the Eurostat database.

The results of Model 3 confirm the validity of the hypothesis about the importance of goodness of fit for coalition-building in three areas: Agriculture and Fisheries ( $p < 0.001$ ), Economic and Financial Affairs ( $p < 0.05$ ) and Environment ( $p < 0.001$ ). In Model 4, the following variables that reflect the structural characteristics of countries in the field of economy, energy and transport are significant: Final consumption expenditure of households and NPISH ( $p < 0.001$ ), General government gross debt ( $p < 0.001$ ), Share of renewable energy in gross final energy consumption ( $p < 0.05$ ), Energy productivity ( $p < 0.001$ ), Final energy consumption ( $p < 0.05$ ) and Greenhouse gas emissions ( $p < 0.001$ ). Thus, it is possible to identify two strategies of coalition behavior. Some countries join contesting coalitions in order not to bear the costs of normative non-compliance with the EU law in a particular area. Other countries form coalitions in order not to bear the financial costs associated with the practical application of the new rules of the game. In

both cases, EU countries are guided by the logic of rationality: the costs of participating in contesting coalitions during the voting process in the Council of Ministers can be reimbursed by delaying or blocking an inconvenient decision ([Tallberg & Jönsson, 2001](#)).

Model 5 aims to test the hypothesis about the impact of the ideological preferences of the EU states on their coalition behavior. The model includes two variables that reflect the ideology of the ruling parties of member countries. The first variable is dummy and divides the EU-28 ruling parties based on the left-right continuum. The second variable is more detailed and divides the “left” and “right” into categories: (1) socialists, (2) social democrats, (3) social liberals, (4) liberals, (5) liberal conservatives, (6) conservatives. Data for both variables is presented by the Manifesto Project database. The third variable in the model reflects the attitude of the country's population to the European Union, which is measured annually by Eurobarometer. The base variable, denoting the left-right cleavage in the Council of Ministers appears to be the only significant variable out of the three discussed above ( $p < 0.05$ ). These results are different from those obtained by [Mattila \(2009\)](#) in a similar study, which was based on the analysis of roll call voting in the Council from 2003 to 2006. The differences in the results of the analysis indicate that in the longer term, the ideological cleavage in the Council of Ministers begins to dominate the cleavage between Euro-skeptics and Euro-optimists. Nevertheless, as [Treib \(2014: 1546\)](#) justly notes, these two cleavages often intersect each other and create a special identity for coalition members. In this regard, it seems necessary to study the coalition strategies of the member countries in the context of the ideological cleavage within the European Union in more detail.

The regression analysis partially confirms the conclusions made in the previous section: geography and time of the country's accession to the EU are significant for the formation of coalitions within the Council of Ministers. However, this effect is only visible in the framework of the cleavage between the western “old” and the eastern “new” EU Member States. The results of the analysis contradict the studies that identify two dimensions of cleavages in the Council: north-south and east-west ([Goetz, 2005](#); [Mattila, 2008](#); [Mattila, 2009](#); [Clark & Jones, 2011](#)). Geographic and ‘temporal’ cleavages are complemented by rationalist calculations of member countries that relate to the Council agenda itself:

Table 3. Regression analysis results for coalition-building in the Council of Ministers of the European Union

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
EU group (Western Europe)	0.017* (0.008)	0.021* (0.027)	0.099* (0.057)	0.031* (0.018)	0.049* (0.019)
EU group (Eastern Europe)	0.050* (0.022)	0.043 (0.017)	-0.058 (0.021)	-0.022* (0.007)	-0.036* (0.012)
EU group (Southern Europe)	-0.064 (0.031)	-	-	-	-
EU group (Northern Europe)	-0.045 (0.019)	-	-	-	-
New EU states (after 2004)	0.073*** (0.038)	-	-	-	-
GDP	-	0.106 (0.054)	0.053 (0.019)	0.027 (0.005)	0.049 (0.019)
Size of territory	-	0.034 (0.011)	0.072 (0.045)	0.088 (0.054)	0.077 (0.048)
Presidency of the Council	-	0.129** (0.067)	-	-	0.061* (0.027)
Contributions to the EU budget	-	-0.006 (0.002)	-0.003 (0.001)	-	-0.004 (0.001)
G7 membership	-	-0.038 (0.013)	-	-	-
Compliance with Agriculture and Fisheries	-	-	-0.089*** (0.044)	-0.125*** (0.071)	-0.085*** (0.039)
Compliance with Economic and Financial Affairs	-	-	-0.103** (0.059)	-0.112** (0.069)	-0.055** (0.027)
Compliance with Energy	-	-	-0.013 (0.007)	-0.020 (0.009)	-0.008 (0.003)

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
Compliance with Transport	-	-	-0.009 (0.003)	-0.011 (0.005)	-0.001 (0.000)
Final consumption expenditure of households and NPISH	-	-	-	-0.003*** (0.001)	-0.009*** (0.004)
General government gross debt	-	-	-	-0.012*** (0.003)	-0.010*** (0.002)
Share of renewable energy in gross final energy consumption	-	-	-	-0.007** (0.002)	-0.014** (0.005)
Energy productivity	-	-	-	-0.004*** (0.001)	-0.003*** (0.001)
Final energy consumption	-	-	-	-0.024** (0.011)	-0.027** (0.014)
Greenhouse gas emissions	-	-	-	-0.005*** (0.002)	-0.017*** (0.008)
Left-right	-	-	-	-	0.038** (0.013)
Left-right (spectrum)	-	-	-	-	0.007 (0.002)
EU attitude	-	-	-	-	-0.154 (0.069)
Constant	1.87*** (0.60)	1.47*** (0.48)	1.76*** (0.57)	1.92*** (0.73)	1.98*** (0.76)
Observations		5160	5160	5160	5160
R <sup>2</sup>	0.23	0.21	0.35	0.48	0.52
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.18	0.16	0.23	0.33	0.35

Note: \* p<0.1; \*\* p<0.05; \*\*\* p<0.01

states that are not interested in changing the status quo for normative or structural reasons tend to block the initiative as part of a bigger coalition, while countries that expect potential preferences from the adoption of new rules of the game, seek to push this agenda. This strategy of coalitional behavior fits into the logic of bargaining, which is the general characteristic for decision-making in all major institutions of the European Union (see [Fearon, 1998](#)). Finally, an important determinant of the coalition behavior of the EU Member States is their ideological preferences. Together with rationalistic intentions, ideology makes the geographic cleavage between the east and west of the European Union not so critical and allows the EU states to go beyond the conventional groups of the “old” and “new” members during the decision making in the Council of Ministers.

## **Conclusion**

The analysis of roll call voting in the Council of Ministers outlined two main cleavages that determine the coalition behavior of the Member States. The first cleavage divides the Council along the west-east geographical line, the existence of which was noted by the authors of earlier studies ([Goetz, 2005](#); [Mattila, 2008](#); [Mattila, 2009](#); [Clark & Jones, 2011](#)). The second cleavage, which is essentially superimposed on the first, is related to the duration of the EU membership: EU-15 countries and “new” Member States often react differently to the discussed agenda. At the same time, both selected cleavages are not insurmountable. The coalitional behavior of the EU Member States in the Council of Ministers is determined not only by the rigid framework of their geographical and ‘temporal’ groups, but also by rational and ideological intentions. The regression analysis demonstrated that the desire of some countries to avoid normative or financial costs due to changes (or lack of changes) in the existing normative status quo determines their decision to join one of the contesting coalitions. An equally important incentive for coalition-building is the ideological closeness of Member States.

In the context of further studies on the topic, it seems valuable to follow two directions of research. The first direction concerns the role of ideology in the formation of coalitional preferences of the Ministers of states. The significance of the ideological factor in this study contradicts the results of earlier works (e.g., [Mattila 2008, 2009](#)). To validate these

results, a better classification of the ideological positions of the EU Member States or another method of measuring their ideological preferences may be needed. The second direction is related to the influence of the President of the Council of Ministers on the coalition-building. A more detailed study of the interaction between the President of the Council and contesting coalitions is necessary in order to obtain more reliable information on the distribution of power within this institution and its decision-making capacity.

## Notes

1. The Council of Ministers portal is available at this link: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/>
2. In this study, Python 3 algorithms (library *mechanize*) were used to gather the necessary roll call voting data.
3. Only two types of infringements are included in the analysis: incorrect transposition and incomplete implementation.

## Acknowledgements

The author is grateful to Prof. Dr. Tanja Börzel and the secretariat of the Center for European integration of the Free University of Berlin (Freie Universität Berlin, FUB) for providing access to Berlin infringement database.

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