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# Negotiations in the Council of the European Union

First results from the 2021 telephone interview survey with member state representatives to Council preparatory bodies

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## Introduction

Between September 2021 and January 2022, the seventh round of the telephone interview survey with member state representatives to Council preparatory bodies was conducted within the research project Negotiations in the Council of the European Union (NCEU) at the Centre for European Research, University of Gothenburg (CERGU). The telephone survey has been carried out every three years since 2003 and seeks to capture the member state representatives' perceptions about the negotiation and cooperation practices in the preparatory work of the Council, and as such elucidate the decision-making practices within the Council. It thereby aims to contribute to a better scholarly understanding of the inner workings of the Council, by complementing the findings of studies using other types of data and empirics, such as observations, in-depth interviews, data on member states' positions and negotiation outcomes, voting records and other official documentation.

The data has been gathered since 2003 and spans almost 20 years of European integration. During this time, the EU has undergone transformative changes, both in terms of membership, but also in terms of depth of cooperation, not least spurred by the crises that has hit Europe in this period. Simultaneously, the politicization and contestation of European integration have added a new layer of resistance against parts of the integration process. Under these circumstances, it is vital to understand the practices in the institutions that govern the integration process, and the survey offers unique possibilities to do this for the Council. The survey data have been used in numerous studies over the years (see the selection of publications in Table 1), and the analyses of the data have targeted a variety of audiences, from the academic community to practitioners, journalists, and the public. The dataset resulting from the survey is also available to other scholars studying the Council, which a number of additional publications has benefitted from. The data has also been used in several student theses at both bachelor and masters' level, mainly at the University of Gothenburg.

In recent years, the effects of Brexit have been of particular interest in the project, and the latest survey round is the first in the post-Brexit environment. It is also the first survey since the Covid-19 pandemic hit the world in 2020, with wide-ranging effects on the practice of negotiations in the Council. With the data from 2021, it will be possible to follow up on earlier results, for instance regarding the effects of Brexit, but also make new analyses based on the questions that were posed for the first time in 2021.

In this brief report, we provide some first analyses of the 2021 data, including some general trend figures on the cooperation between the member states in the Council.

Table 1. Selected publications by the research team based on the data from 2003-2018

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**Journal articles:**

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Huhe, Narisong, Robert Thomson, Javier Arregui and Daniel Naurin. 2022. "Intergovernmental cooperation networks, national policy positions and partisan ideologies: longitudinal evidence from the Council of the European Union", *Journal of European Public Policy*, Volume 29, Issue 1.

Huhe, Narisong, Daniel Naurin and Robert Thomson. 2020. "Don't cry for me Britannia: The resilience of the European Union to Brexit", *European Union Politics*, Volume 21, Issue 1.

Huhe, Narisong, Naurin, Daniel and Thomson, Robert. 2018. "The evolution of political networks: Evidence from the Council of the European Union", *European Union Politics*, Volume 19, Issue 1.

Häge, Frank M. and Naurin, Daniel. 2013. "The effect of co-decision on Council decision-making: Informalization, politicization, and power", *Journal of European Public Policy*, Volume 20, Issue 7.

Johansson, Markus. 2021. "Explaining Cooperation in the Council of the EU Before and After the Brexit Referendum", *Politics and Governance*, Volume 9, Issue 1.

Naurin, Daniel. 2015. "Generosity in intergovernmental negotiations: The impact of state power, pooling and socialization in the Council of the EU", *European Journal of Political Research*, Volume 54, Issue 4.

Naurin, Daniel and Lindahl, Rutger. 2010. "Out in the cold? Flexible integration and the political status of the Euro opt outs", *European Union Politics*, Volume 11, Issue 4.

Naurin, Daniel. 2010. "Most common when least important? Deliberation in the European Union Council of Ministers", *British Journal of Political Science*, Volume 40, Issue 1.

Naurin, Daniel. 2007. "Why give reason? Measuring arguing and bargaining in survey research", *Swiss Political Science Review*, Volume 13, Issue 4.

Naurin, Daniel and Lindahl, Rutger. 2005. "Sweden: The twin faces of a Euro-outsider", *Journal of European Integration*, Volume 27, Issue 1.

Naurin, Daniel, Naurin Elin and Alexander, Amy. 2019. "Gender Stereotyping and Chivalry in International Negotiations: A Survey Experiment in the Council of the European Union" *International Organization*, Volume 73, Issue 2.

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**Books/chapters/reports:**

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Johansson, Markus. 2018. "Sweden's best friends in the Council of the EU." in Rosén Sundström, Malena and Bengtsson, Richard (eds), *The EU and the emerging global order*. Lund: Department of Political Science.

Johansson, Markus. 2015. *Negotiations as usual. Putting domestic constraints on the table in the Council of the European Union* (Doctoral thesis). Göteborg: Department of Political Science, University of Gothenburg.

Johansson, Markus, Daniel Naurin and Rutger Lindahl. 2019. *Samarbete och inflytande i EU:s ministerråd*. Swedish Institute for European Policy Studies, SIEPS 2019:6epa.

Narisong, Huhe, Naurin, Daniel and Thomson, Robert. 2017. *With or without you? Policy impact and networks in the Council of the EU after Brexit*. Swedish Institute for European Studies, SIEPS 2017:8epa.

Naurin, Daniel and Naurin, Elin. 2018. "Descriptive representation and negotiation: Gender balance in the committees of the Council of the European Union", in Aggestam, Karin and Towns, Ann E. (eds), *Gendering diplomacy and international negotiation*, Basingstoke: Palgrave.

Naurin, Daniel. 2015. "The Councils of the EU. Intergovernmental bargaining in a supranational polity" in Richardson, Jeremy J. (ed), *European Union: Power and policy-making*, London: Routledge.

Naurin, Daniel and Lindahl Rutger. 2008. "East, North, South. Coalition-building in the Council before and after enlargement", in Naurin, Daniel and Wallace, Helen (eds), *Unveiling the Council of the EU. Games governments play in Brussels*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

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## The survey and data

Any empirical analysis is reliant on having high quality data. In the NCEU data, one quality indicator is the high response rate to the survey. In each round of the survey, the aim has been to interview one representative from each member state to eleven of the Council's preparatory bodies. The sample of preparatory bodies has been fairly consistent over the years, including both senior committees and working groups in a variety of policy areas.<sup>1</sup> This selection has been done with the purpose of obtaining a broad coverage of perspectives, but also to make it possible to analyse variation in the data. In 2021, this selection meant that the sample of respondents was 297 (11 working groups/committees x 27 member states). As shown in Table 2, the total response rate for all rounds is over 80 %, which is exceptionally high for social science research. At the same time, the response rate varies somewhat between the rounds, from 73 % in 2015 to 87 % in 2009. The 2021 survey resulted in 223 conducted interviews, amounting to a 75 % response rate, which is lower than the average, yet high.

Table 2. Response rates in the seven survey rounds

	<b>Number of respondents</b>	<b>Response rate</b>
2003	131	79 %
2006	231	84 %
2009	257	87 %
2012	249	84 %
2015	225	73 %
2018	251	81 %
2021	223	75 %
<b>Total</b>	<b>1567</b>	<b>81 %</b>

In all rounds of the survey, we have generally sensed a positive attitude towards the project among the respondents that we contact, showing an interest in the work we are doing, and general willingness to participate. The high response rate is a testament to that. We hope that this is something that will persist also in the future. The participation rate has in each round of the survey however varied somewhat between member states and preparatory bodies. In 2021, these differences are larger than before. In two of the previous rounds, there has been one member state from which we have only been able to conduct five interviews, Greece in 2006 and the UK in 2015. In 2021, there

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<sup>1</sup> The preparatory bodies included have been mostly the same in all rounds, including Coreper 1, Coreper 2, Political Security Committee (PSC), Special Committee on Agriculture (SCA), Economic Policy Committee (EPC), Politico-Military Group (PMG), Working Party on Tax Questions, Coordinating committee in the area of police and judicial cooperation in criminal matters (CATS), Working Party on Agricultural Questions (but Working party on horizontal agricultural questions in 2018 and Working party of chief veterinary officers in 2021), Working Party on Competitiveness and Growth, and Working party on the Environment. In 2003, the MashrekMahgreb working party and the Working party on Enlargement were included instead of the Working Party on Competitiveness and Growth and the Coordinating committee in the area of police and judicial cooperation in criminal matters (CATS).

were three member states from which we only got five interviews: France, Luxemburg, and Slovakia. From several other member states, we were able to conduct all 11 interviews that we asked for (Estonia, the Netherlands and Sweden). There is also variation in response rates among the preparatory bodies, varying from 14 interviews in the Working Party on Tax Questions and 15 interviews in the Politico-Military Group, to 24 interviews in the Coordinating committee in the area of police and judicial cooperation in criminal matters (CATS), the Working Party on Competitiveness and Growth, and the Working party on the Environment. This variation is however less exceptional when put in comparison to previous survey rounds.

## **Findings: Member states' network capital and cooperation patterns**

During the period from the first telephone survey in 2003 to the latest in 2021 the EU has changed dramatically. It has gone through several enlargement rounds and one exit, but also evolved to become more integrated than ever, which has not least been an effect of how the EU has handled the many challenges and crises that have hit Europe for more than a decade. Each survey round has contained its unique set of questions, but one question has been posed in all of them, which aims to map the member states' cooperative relations, and it asks: "Which member states do you most often cooperate with within your working group/committee in order to develop a common position?"

As an individual survey item, this question is the one that has been most frequently analysed, and for which we also have the best opportunities to study changes over time. When we pose this question to the survey respondents, we only ask them to mention other member states, but not explicitly to rank them. In analysing our responses, we have however interpreted the order in which member states are mentioned as an implicit ranking. We base this on the idea that the member state that a respondent cooperates with the most is also the one that first comes to mind. Depending on the order in which different member states are mentioned, they have therefore been assigned scores, starting with 10 points to the first member state that is mentioned, 9 points to the second member state, and so on.<sup>2</sup>

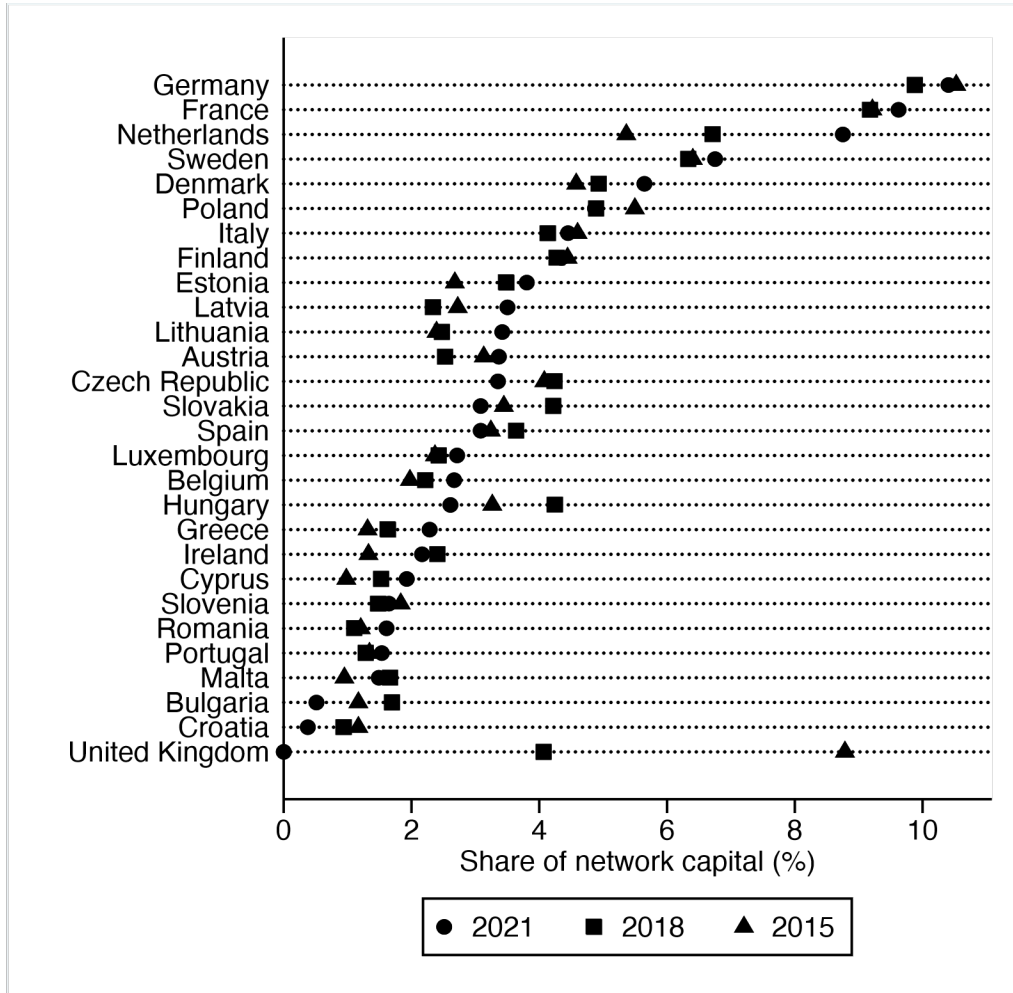
We have aggregated this data by summarizing the scores assigned to each of the member states each year, and divided this with the sum of scores delivered that year, resulting in a percentage of total scores assigned to each member state each year. This makes the figures comparable over time, and the measure indicates the frequency with which the different member states are mentioned as cooperation partners. Member states that are often mentioned as cooperation partners may have better possibilities to build alliances and gain access to and spread information, which are important

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<sup>2</sup> We have also made analyses where we do not use this implicit ranking, but instead assign one point to each member state that is mentioned, regardless of the order. This alternative specification is highly correlated with the ranking scores and has limited impact on the overall figures.

assets when seeking to influence decisions. We refer to this as *network capital*. The member states' network capital for the last three rounds of the interview survey is displayed in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Member states' network capital in 2021, 2018 and 2015



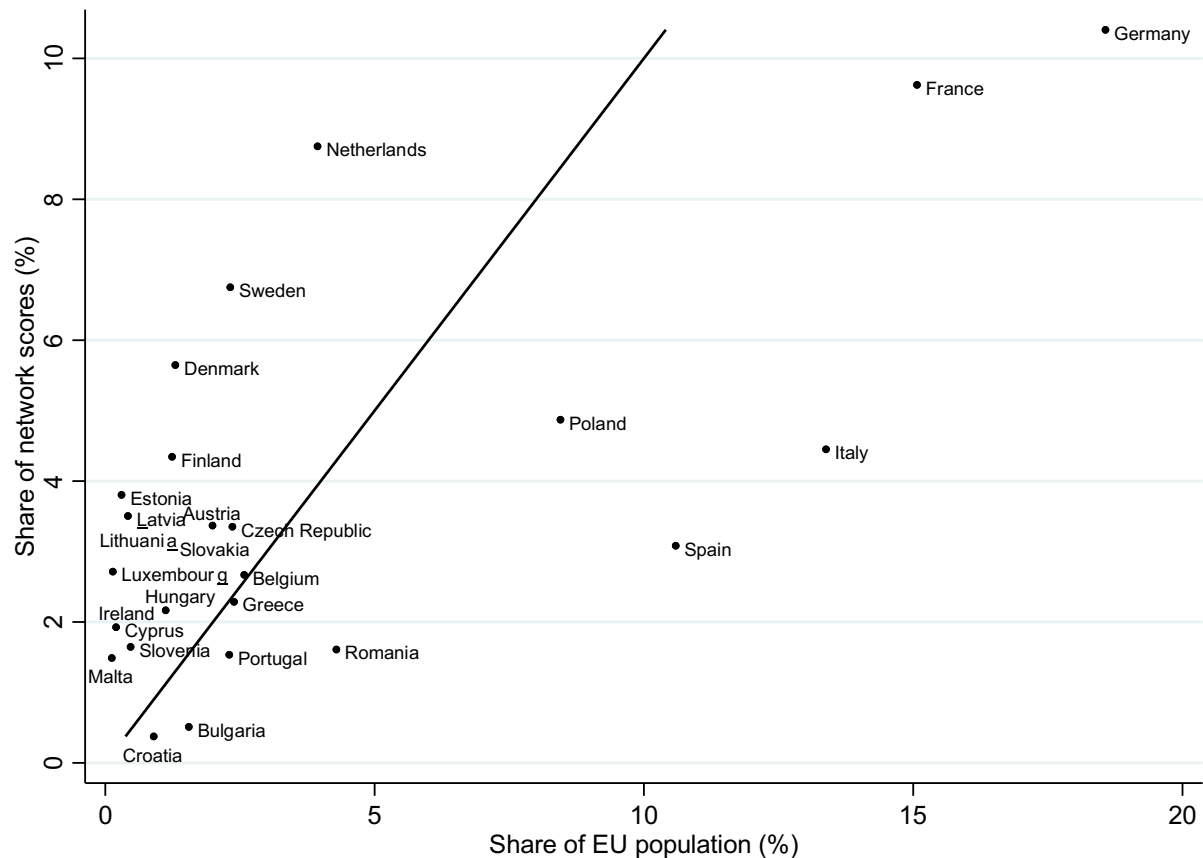
*Note:* The member states' network capital is based on the survey question: "Which member states do you most often cooperate with within your working group/committee in order to develop a common position?" Member states are ordered based on their 2021 scores.

As is apparent in Figure 1, the member states' network capital is remarkably stable over time, with mostly small fluctuations.<sup>3</sup> One obvious exception to this is the UK, which lost half its network capital between 2015 and 2018, and was not included in the study from 2021. The UK was previously positioned as one of the top three member states regarding network capital, alongside Germany and France (as indicated by its 2015 mark). Once Brexit became a reality, a discussion emerged about whether any other member state would take the UK's place as the new number three in the EU.

<sup>3</sup> Bivariate correlation coefficients are over 0,9 in each possible comparison of two rounds, as long as the UK is removed from the comparisons including the 2018 round.

Speculations were aired about whether member states like Italy or Poland would seek to fill the UK's void. What we can observe in the network capital data from 2021 is rather that the Netherlands has taken this position. The Netherlands has steadily increased its network capital during these years and has joined Germany and France in the top group, even distancing the member states placed fourth and lower in the 2021 round.

Figure 2. Relation between member states' population sizes and their network capital in 2021



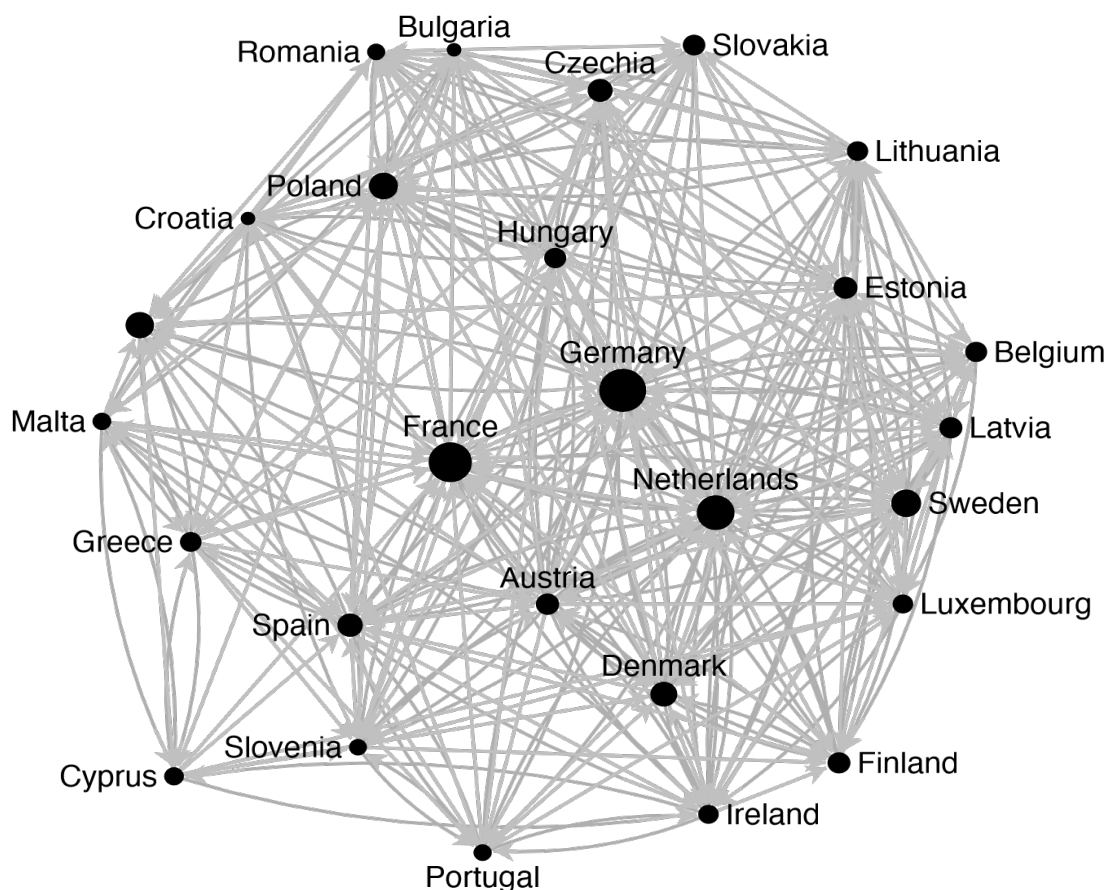
*Note:* The member states' network capital is based on the survey question: "Which member states do you most often cooperate with within your working group/committee in order to develop a common position?" Population sizes are displayed as percentages of the total EU population and gathered from the Council's voting calculator (<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/council-eu/voting-system/voting-calculator/>).

What is also apparent in Figure 1 is that although Germany and France are at the top of the list in terms of network capital, the order of the member states does not follow the size of the member states. Figure 2 displays the relation between member state size, measured in terms of their population size, and their network capital. Population sizes are chosen here as they determine the member states' voting power under Qualified Majority Voting (QMV) requirements. The figure also includes a diagonal line that represents the perfectly proportional relation between member state network

capital and population size. This means that member states located above the line (to the left) have higher network capital than what their size would suggest, whereas member states below the line (to the right) have lower network capital than what their size would suggest, if the relation was strictly proportional.

While the member states' network capital is interesting as it allows comparisons of the member states that are most frequently cooperation partners to others, it says nothing about the patterns of those cooperative relations, i.e. which member states that cooperate with each other. To discern this, we need to analyse the network relations. Figure 3 displays the network relations based on the data from 2021. Each member state is represented by a dot in the network, and each arrow represents an outgoing or incoming network tie to each of the member states. The size of each member state dot is determined by its network capital. Accordingly, Germany, France and the Netherlands are represented by the largest dots, while Croatia, Bulgaria and Malta are represented by the smallest.

Figure 3. Cooperation patterns in the Council in 2021



*Note:* Based on the survey question: “Which member states do you most often cooperate with within your working group/committee in order to develop a common position?”



The distances between the member states in the network can be read as an *estimation* of the strength of their network relations. A small distance indicates a stronger cooperative relation, while a longer distance indicates a weaker cooperative relation. The figure displays the member states on two artificial dimensions, x and y (horizontal and vertical), which have no inherent meaning, but are useful to map patterns of cooperation. What we have concluded in previous rounds of the survey is that the network patterns follow the European geography, and that the relations are generally stronger between neighbouring member states. This is visible also in 2021. Similar geographical patterns have also been observed in studies using other types of data, and have often been described as a division between northern, southern and eastern member states.<sup>4</sup> These geographical patterns should not be understood as showing that the member states form distinct geographical clusters in the Council, but rather that geographical proximity is a basis for stronger cooperative ties. But while these geographical patterns are descriptively accurate, it is worth emphasizing that geography is not in itself an explanation for the stronger cooperative ties. We rather believe that geographical proximity coincides with other similarities between the member states and their representatives, most notably shared interests, but possibly also for instance cultural traits and references.

## Concluding remarks

The survey conducted in 2021 was the seventh round since 2003. Over time, and as the time series has expanded, the data has become increasingly useful for the purpose of studying changes over time. In this report, we have focused specifically on the cooperative relations between the member states, and concluded that cooperation patterns and network capital are rather stable. We however also observe that there are some changes over time that are worth further exploration, and explanation. For instance, we highlighted above that the network capital of the Netherlands has increased over the last three rounds, but we also see some changes among in particular the Baltic and Visegrad states. These changes, and how they can be explained, is something we aim to analyse further in the coming years.

In addition to the cooperation patterns, our latest survey round included numerous questions on topics like information sharing in the working groups and committees; the role of voting rules and risks of being outvoted; how compliance affects cooperation; and the impact of Brexit. Our analyses of these and other questions included in the 2021 survey will continue in the coming years, and help us to gain a better understanding of the practices of negotiations and cooperation in the Council and its various preparatory bodies. Much like the analyses we have carried out on the data from the previous survey rounds, the 2021 survey is helps us unravel what shapes European integration in turbulent times.

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<sup>4</sup> E.g. Mattila, Mikko. 2009. "Roll call analysis of voting in the European Union Council of Ministers after the 2004 enlargement", *European Journal of Political Research*, Volume 48, Issue 6. ; Thomson, Robert. 2009. "Actor alignments in the European Union before and after enlargement", *European Journal of Political Research*, Volume 48, Issue 6.