‘Multiple Bilateralism’ within the European Union: the Dutch Coalition-Building Network during the Budget Negotiations*

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Abstract
‘Multiple bilateralism’ stresses the manner in which bilateral relations between the Member States operate in function of the multilateral EU negotiation process. In order to explore how multiple bilateralism works, a network analysis has been made of the Dutch coalition-building effort during the negotiation on the Multiannual Financial Framework 2014–2020. It examines the interaction between the various actors involved in this process, such as the ministries in The Hague, the EU institutions in Brussels, the governments of other Member States and the embassies abroad. Specific attention is given to this last type of actor. Contrary to what is often assumed, bilateral embassies’ contribution to the negotiation process is relatively modest. Only a few embassies, namely those in the largest EU Member States, were able to play a more important role and direct contact with Member States’ capitals was considered to be the predominant channel for success.

Keywords: multiple bilateralism; negotiations; diplomacy; embassies; networks; budget

Introduction

Interest in the role of bilateralism within the European Union has increased over the past years. The enlargement of the Union to 28 Member States, the incorporation of the European Council as a formal EU institution into the Lisbon Treaty, the high-profile inter-governmental bargaining in order to save the euro and the visible and prominent role of Berlin in European decision-making have re-sensitized both scholars and practitioners to the importance of bilateral relations within the EU. The interest in this phenomenon, however, goes back further. It is perhaps not surprising that preoccupation with the interaction between bilateral relations and multilateral negotiations originates with early writers on foreign policy and diplomatic practice within the European integration process. Where the primary focus of EU studies is, understandably, on the multilateral process, the field of diplomatic studies has a traditional interest in bilateralism. Hill and Wallace (1979), for example, when studying the earliest years of European political co-operation, observed that national diplomatic services were heavily involved in making this system work.

But signalling the importance of bilateral diplomacy was not confined to co-operation in foreign policy. Diplomatic practitioners in the 1980s and 90s had a clear understanding that in order to move the European integration process forward, Brussels-based negotiations

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on EU policies in general had to be supported by bilateral efforts. The German diplomat Otto Von der Gablentz was one of the first to refer to a qualitative change in that ‘bilateral relations within Europe are subject to an almost irrevocable process of transformation from traditional bilateral relations to something different which might properly be called intra-European relations’, and that these relations should be regarded as ‘an integral part of European integration policy’ (1987, pp. 68–9). Philippe de Schoutheete (1990), a Belgian diplomat and Permanent Representative, refers to several examples of bilateral or trilateral co-operation as ‘sub-systems’, which can strengthen the process of European integration.

The purpose of this article is to examine how multiple bilateralism works in practice and to analyze in particular the contribution of bilateral embassies — as well-known instruments for maintaining bilateral relations — to the EU negotiation process. This will be done through an exploratory case study on the manner in which the Dutch coalition-building network functioned during an important negotiation — that on the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) 2014–2020. A social network analysis is used in order to study the relations between different actors in this process. The first section of this article summarizes the debate on multiple bilateralism and the role of bilateral embassies within the EU. The second section describes the selection and the content of the case study on the MFF talks. The third section sets out the research design and data collection. The fourth section provides a detailed description and analysis of the Dutch negotiating network. It looks at the frequency with which the ministry responsible for co-ordinating the negotiations interacted with other European capitals, EU institutions and embassies. The fifth section examines the value that co-ordinating officials attached to information received from other actors in the network. The article ends with conclusions on multiple bilateralism with regard to EU negotiations and the role and added value of Member States’ embassies in particular.

I. Multiple Bilateralism Within the EU

Since the beginning of this century, academics have started to give more thought to the observations of practitioners mentioned above and to provide a more conceptual approach towards the role of bilateral relations within the process of European integration. Keukeleire speaks of a mixed ‘bi-multilateral’ set of processes within the EU (2000, pp. 4–5) and argues that the meaning of European integration lies not just in the ability to implement common policies, but also in enabling Member States ‘to arrange their mutual relations in a satisfactory manner’ (2003, p. 32). According to him, ‘interrelational goals’, the goals relating to the setting and shaping of relations between Member States — such as increased mutual understanding, increased predictability of each other’s policies, improved mutual solidarity — lie at the basis of the European integration. ‘As a result of the process of European integration, the earlier bilateral relations between member states are increasingly situated in a structured framework or even completely absorbed into the multilateral framework depending on the degree of integration in the various policy areas’ (2003, p. 32–4).

Another author who gave more thought to the manner in which Member States advance their interests within the EU through the use of bilateral relations is Kohler-Koch, who in 2000 referred to this as ‘multiple bilateralism’ (cited in Blair, 2004, p. 201). She
approached this puzzle from the angle of ‘network governance’, which stresses the multi-level nature of the EU and pays particular attention to non-hierarchical forms of decision-making and the interaction between public and private actors in the policy process. Network governance endeavours to co-ordinate ‘related interests in multilateral negotiations to approximate positions’ (Kohler-Koch, 2005, p. 39). Network governance offers an interesting perspective to look at the way in which the bilateral and the multilateral level interact, precisely because it stresses non-hierarchical co-operation in dynamic networks, which exceeds the boundaries of the formal Brussels-based Council system. While Kohler-Koch originally stressed the importance of the interaction with private sector players, Börzel pointed out that while the involvement of private actors and experts might be high in the agenda-setting and implementation stage, the actual EU negotiations are still largely dominated by governmental actors (cited in Kohler-Koch and Rittberger, 2006, p. 36). This is acknowledged in a contribution by Kohler-Koch on the enlargement of the EU, where she pursues the hypothesis that ‘within and beyond the EU a system of multiple networks is evolving which has put national governments in a central position for managing interdependence’. She stresses that multiple bilateralism works in two directions, in that it is ‘a well-established strategy both to promote the European case and to secure partial interests’. According to her, ‘the interaction between multilateral and bilateral relations is still a heavily under-researched field of inquiry. Empirical evidence gathered so far proves correct the assumption that most bilateral activities relate to coalition building concerning EU policies’ (Kohler-Koch, 2005, pp. 36–44).

A recent study by Krotz and Schild (2013) on French–German co-operation within the EU departs from the concept of ‘embedded bilateralism’. They understand embedded bilateralism ‘not only as an institutionalized and normative relationship between two states’, but also as ‘the interrelationship between this bilateral connection and multilateral European politics’ (2013, p. 8). In this sense their approach is very similar to that of the concept of multiple bilateralism. Where in multiple bilateralism the focus is somewhat more on the contribution of bilateral relations to the multilateral negotiation process, ‘embedded bilateralism’ – as the term suggests – puts more stress on the way bilateral relations between Member States are regularized through their EU membership. The authors point out that, in some respects, embedded bilateralism can indeed be regarded as a governance approach to European integration, in particular that of multi-level governance, because it also pays attention to the interplay among different levels of government, not only the Brussels level (Krotz and Schild, 2013, p. 13). They quote Webber in warning us not to overlook ‘an entire level of policy making’ consisting of ‘the informal level of bi-tri or multilateral negotiation of policy among subsets of EU member governments’ (Krotz and Schild, 2013, p. 10). They underline that a difference between embedded bilateralism and existing governance approaches, such as multi-level governance and network governance, is that the former has a less supranational outlook and is primarily related to the concept of the nation state and its diplomatic machinery. In this respect it is, contrary to the original intentions of the governance approach, more inspired by intergovernmentalism (p. 13).

For questions related to the nation state and its diplomatic machinery, one can turn to scholars in diplomacy who have studied the EU as an example of a highly regularized diplomatic environment. While in general there seems to be a ‘certain unconnectedness’ between EU studies and diplomatic studies (Jørgensen, 1999), some of the pioneering
work done by scholars such as Bátora and Hocking on what they call ‘intra-EU diplomacy’ has enriched the study of both the process of European integration and that on diplomacy. Whereas, according to them, traditional ‘Westphalian’ diplomacy is ‘a system of norms and rules enabling states to survive and interact in an anarchical environment’, intra-EU diplomacy is ‘an emerging set of norms and rules regulating interaction of states in a rule-based legal environment’ (2009, p. 116). They have described the characteristics of this type of diplomacy, such as higher connectivity between Member States’ administrations and a changing role for embassies, which gear their work for an important part towards the EU process. Both consider coalition-building, by which Member States try to achieve their policy objectives within the EU, to be an important feature of intra-EU diplomacy. Like Kohler-Koch, they emphasize that there is a lack of empirical research and that studies on communication patterns are necessary to ‘develop a fuller picture of the overall patterns of diplomatic interaction in the EU arena’ in order to provide a better perspective on its ‘multilayered character’ (Bátora and Hocking, 2009, p. 164). To examine the way in which EU negotiations function, one should not only look at multilateral fora such as the EU institutions, as most existing studies do, but also at the role of national capitals and bilateral embassies.

Among scholars on diplomacy, as well as among practitioners, there is debate on the role and added value of bilateral embassies within the EU. The starting point of this debate is that the diplomatic network of resident embassies within the EU is challenged in several ways: first, through a process of ‘domestication’ of relations between Member States (Duchêne, 1973), which has led to the close involvement of line ministries in transnational policy-making and direct contacts with counterparts in other Member States; second, through ‘Brusselization’, in which the role of the bilateral embassy could be diminished in favour of Brussels-based decision-making (Bratberg, 2008); third, through technological advancement, not restricted to the intra-EU environment, which makes it much easier to communicate across borders. More than ten years ago, Riordan (2003) predicted a strongly reduced role for bilateral embassies within Europe and considered them to act largely as a ‘post box’ for other government ministries. The current article does not want to interfere with this larger debate on the use of embassies within the EU, but restricts itself to their contribution to EU negotiations.

Several authors suggest that embassies within Europe, apart from their role in maintaining good bilateral relations, remain important for providing input to EU negotiations. Blair argues, for example, that bilateral relations play an important part in forging EU coalitions, referring to the practice in the UK where the government makes ‘use of embassies in national capitals to sound out member states’ negotiating positions prior to every Council meeting’ (2004, p. 203). According to Paschke (2000), in his often cited inspection report on the German embassy network in Europe, these embassies ‘must be actively involved in promoting Germany’s positions and sounding out those taken by other EU Member States on topics under negotiation in Brussels’. Along similar lines, the Dutch government (2013) states that its missions within the EU contribute by providing ‘elaborate reports on relevant developments which can influence the taking of positions within the EU’. Reference in this regard is made to the run-up to the European Council and the councils on External Relations, General Affairs and Justice and Home Affairs, ‘but as much on specific European dossiers which are of special interest’. In a study which includes the views of representatives of Member States’ bilateral missions in Vienna on
intra-EU diplomacy, reference is made to a ‘clearly discernible trend of “re-gearing” political work of the embassies towards Coreper negotiations’ (Bátora and Hocking, 2008, p. 17). In another contribution, on the role of the European diplomatic community in Bratislava, mention is made of French diplomats who consider that ‘the ability to convince and to create majorities is the prerogative of bilateral embassies’, something which ‘cannot be achieved only in Brussels’ (Glabovská, 2010, p. 15). In this article, the assumption that bilateral embassies play an important role with regard to EU negotiations will be tested.

II. The Case of the Multiannual Financial Framework Negotiations

As has been mentioned by several authors, there is a lack of empirical insight into how bilateral relations work in function of EU negotiations. Case studies on EU negotiations generally focus on the process in Brussels (Hosli, 1996; Da Conceição-Heldt, 2006; Veen, 2011). In order to examine multiple bilateralism as a particular form of network governance, it is necessary to look at bilateral contacts which take place beyond the direct deliberations between negotiators within the Council system, and how the various actors involved function as a network whose actions support the process of the formal EU negotiations. One of the few network studies to look at multi-bilateral processes within EU negotiations has been undertaken as part of a research project at Mannheim University. In their analysis of transgovernmental communication patterns between various ministries during the Amsterdam Treaty negotiations, the authors stress the importance of informal administrative networks between Member States (Thurner and Pappi, 2009). The role of bilateral embassies, however, is not part of their research. Another interesting network analysis of EU negotiations, which included contacts outside the formal Council meetings with a view to building coalitions, has been done by Beyers and Dierickx (1998). This study, however, focused on Brussels-based members of Working Groups, whom did not work at bilateral embassies but at the Permanent Representation in Brussels. One of the findings of this study is that this network had both supranational as well as inter-governmental elements, because both representatives of the EU institutions, as well as those of the three largest Member States, occupied a central position in it (p. 313).

In order to explore the interaction between bilateral contacts and EU negotiations, an example of coalition-building by the Netherlands during an important negotiation has been selected. The Netherlands is a Member State with average voting power, which falls in between the large and the small Member States. It is perceived as an active participant in EU coalition-building (Naurin and Lindahl, 2008, p. 71) and has a medium-sized diplomatic network, with representation in every other Member State. In order to select a case study in which — in addition to national capitals and EU institutions — the role and contribution of bilateral embassies could be examined, resource persons from three Dutch embassies in large Member States (those in Berlin, London and Paris) and three in small Member States (those in Budapest, Dublin and Lisbon) were asked to indicate the four EU negotiations on which the embassy had spent most of its time during the past two years.1 These resource persons all dealt with EU issues at their embassy and were of

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1 The resource persons from those six embassies were approached between 6 and 10 June 2013.
average diplomatic rank, varying from first secretary to counsellor; three of them held the position of deputy head of mission. The EU negotiations mentioned by them were economic governance, the sovereign debt crisis, MFF, banking union, Schengen and enlargement. For several reasons, the negotiation on the MFF was subsequently selected. First of all, it contained both highly political as well as technical elements, therewith in principle combining two types of EU negotiations. Second, because a political agreement had to be reached by unanimity, the negotiation potentially involved contact with every Member State. Third, the negotiation result was considered by the Dutch to be successful, so that failure could not be blamed on inefficient usage of the available network. The period studied is that from the presentation of the Commission proposal on 29 July 2011 until the agreement reached in the European Council on 8 February 2013.

The purpose of the MFF negotiation was to reach agreement on the EU funding priorities for the next seven years and how these should be financed. Two main negotiating blocs could be distinguished during the negotiations, although within those there were subdivisions with regard to specific themes. On the one hand, there was the ‘Likeminded Group’, the core of which was formed by Germany, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Sweden, Denmark, Finland, France and Austria. This group was joined by Italy and the Czech Republic. At the final stage of the negotiations – after the inconclusive European Council meeting on 23 November 2012 – co-operation intensified between the so-called ‘True-Likeminded’, comprising Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden and the United Kingdom. On the other hand, there was the ‘Friends of Cohesion Group’, led by Poland, together with the other central and eastern European countries, Cyprus, Malta and Spain. During the negotiation period, the EU presidency was carried out by, respectively, Poland, Denmark, Cyprus and Ireland. Denmark held the presidency during the most crucial period, when the so-called ‘negotiating box’ was discussed. The Irish presidency started in the last few weeks of the negotiations, when European Council president Van Rompuy and his staff had taken the lead. Apart from the meetings in the framework of the Council in Brussels, an active circuit of bilateral contacts and sub-group meetings took place. Dutch embassies within the EU provided The Hague with the point of view of the authorities in their capital. This was done through written reports, email, telephone conversations and videoconferences. There was direct contact – either through email, telephone or visits – between The Hague and ministries of Foreign Affairs, ministries of Finance and Prime Minister’s offices in other capitals.

III. Social Network Analysis: Identifying Actors, Collecting Data

In order to analyse how the Dutch coalition-building network functioned during the MFF negotiation, social network analysis is a powerful methodological tool. The primary aim of social network analysis is detecting and interpreting patterns of social ties among actors (De Nooy et al., 2005). Actors can be people in a group, departments within an organization or nation-states in the world system. A social tie or relation can be defined as a ‘specific kind of contact, connection or tie between a pair of actors’ (Knoke and Yang, 2008, p. 7). Most social networks contain people or organizations that are central. Because of their position, they have, for example, better access to information and better opportunities to spread information.
An interesting element of social network analysis is that it can be used to scrutinize both formal and informal relations. Informal communication is important to the operation of organizations and it does not always coincide with the organization’s formal structure. The idea of networked governance has often been presented as a solution for multilateral organizations which are regularly considered slow and inefficient (Hafner-Burton et al., 2009) and it can indeed operate alongside or supporting the official structure. In this article social network analysis offers a methodology to investigate social interaction among policy actors within a particular governance structure, in function of an EU negotiation.

Preliminary interviews² were held and the organizational charts of both the system for interdepartmental co-ordination and the mission network were examined, in order to identify relevant actors within the negotiating network. The general guidelines and priorities of the Dutch negotiating position were prepared through a system of interdepartmental co-ordination and agreed by the cabinet of ministers. The ministry of Foreign Affairs was responsible for co-ordinating the negotiations. Within this ministry a taskforce was formed at the Department for European Integration, which dealt with the flow of information and negotiating tactics on a daily basis. Other actors in The Hague closely involved in this process were the ministry of Finance, the ministry of Economic Affairs and the office of the Prime Minister. The ministry of Finance was involved because of its responsibility for the yearly EU budget negotiations, which are based on the multi-annual budgetary framework, and because of its role in assessing the impact on the national budget. The ministry of Economic Affairs was involved because of its responsibility for agricultural, cohesion and innovation policies, which are partly financed out of the EU budget. The Prime Minister’s Office was in the loop because the negotiations eventually had to be concluded by the European Council. The Permanent Representation in Brussels represented the Netherlands in the Council and maintained relations with the EU institutions. The Dutch bilateral embassies were expected to be in touch with the authorities of the Member State in which they resided, to report on relevant developments and to explain the Dutch position. Embassies could provide information on demand or at their own initiative.

Based on the preliminary research, 58 actors which could have potentially played a role in the Dutch process of coalition-building were selected. These consist of four Dutch ministries, the Dutch Permanent Representation, 26 Dutch bilateral embassies, 26 capitals of the other Member States and the combined EU institutions. For practical reasons, and because this study focuses on the Dutch negotiation effort, the distribution of a standardized questionnaire was restricted to the 31 Dutch organizational units in the network. The questionnaire was sent to the person, mostly a mid-career staff member, responsible for handling the MFF negotiation within his or her organization. In the questionnaire, the respondents were asked to report the average frequency of contact of their organization (ministry, embassy) regarding the MFF negotiation — either through written report, email, telephone or visit — with the other actors, including those which were non-Dutch. They had to exclude the regular reports and general emails sent by the ministry of Foreign Affairs to all intra-EU embassies with updates on the negotiations, in order to enable a meaningful differentiation among the actors involved. The standardized questionnaire consisted of a table with the other actors mentioned. Behind each of the actors they were

² These interviews took place between 10 June and 1 July 2013.
asked to put a score between one and six, which represented the frequency of the contacts. One stood for ‘several times a week’, two for ‘once a week to several times a month’, three for ‘once a month to once every quarter’, four for ‘once every four months to half-yearly’, five for ‘once or twice during whole negotiating period’ and six for ‘none’. They were specifically requested to answer on behalf of their organizational unit (ministry, embassy). They were able to do this because of their primary responsibility within their organization for the MFF and because the number of the people involved within each organization was very limited. For example, within each of the ministries and embassies involved there was one person primarily responsible for the MFF file, who also prepared and often also attended any meetings his or her director, ambassador or minister had on this topic. The exception was the MFF team at the Department for European Integration, which was responsible for the overall co-ordination and consisted of three people, who were also responsible for preparing talks by their superiors. This is the only organizational actor for which two persons filled out, independently from each other, the questionnaire (the total of their score was divided by two).

The completed questionnaires were returned between 3 July and 24 September 2013. There was a high response rate of 84 per cent (no response was received from the embassies in Helsinki, Riga, Tallinn, Valletta and Vilnius). A tie with an actor from which no response was received or requested (in case of the non-Dutch actors) was based on the score reported by a single actor, always a Dutch actor, using the accepted practice of symmetrization (Mérand et al., 2011, p. 127). The score for the level of connectedness between two actors in the network was calculated by the sum of the scores given by both actors divided by two (and, if needed, rounded upwards from 0.5). The difference between the calculated average score of two actors and the score given by one of those actors was never higher than one. This difference was even smaller, never exceeding 0.5, with regard to the scores that expressed the relationship between the Department for European Integration and another actor.

IV. The Coalition-Building Network: Results and Interpretation

The results based on the completed questionnaires are shown in Table 1a and 1b. As could be deducted from the official Dutch co-ordination system and preliminary interviews, the Department for European Integration (DIE), falling under the responsibility of the minister for Foreign Affairs, was tasked with co-ordinating the MFF negotiations. This can also be concluded on the basis of the closeness centrality of this actor, which can be calculated by using the Pajek software for social network analysis. The closeness centrality of a node, which represents an actor in the network, is calculated by means of dividing 1 by the average of shortest paths from this actor to all other actors in the network. In this way, an actor with a direct tie to all others ends up with a closeness score of 1. Actors which connect to most others through many intermediaries get a closeness score nearer to zero. The actor with the highest closeness centrality is the Department for European Integration (1.00). As explained, this department was responsible for co-ordinating the Dutch negotiating position, in close co-operation with the department for Foreign Financial Relations of the ministry of Finance and the Prime Minister’s Office, which also occupy a central place in the network (0.76 and 0.67 respectively).
### Table 1a: Frequency Scores between Actors, without Capitals of Other Member States

| DIE | FIN | PM | EA | PR | EU | ATH | BUL | NAP | BDP | BRU | BCR | BTL | DUB | HEL | COP | LON | LIS | LUS | LUX | MAD | NIC | PAR | PRL | ROM | STO | SOF | TAL | VAL | VIL | WAR | VIE |
|-----|-----|----|----|----|----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|
| 4   | 3   | 2  | 1  | 1  | 3  | 4   | 2   | 3   | 4   | 3   | 4   | 3   | 4   | 3   | 4   | 3   | 4   | 3   | 4   | 3   | 4   | 3   | 4   | 3   | 4   | 3   | 4   | 3   | 4   | 3   | 4   | 3   | 4   | 3   | 4   | 3   | 4   | 3   | 4   |

### Table 1b: Frequency Scores with Capitals of Other Member States

| DIE  | FIN  | PM  | PM  | PM  | PM  | PM  | PM  | PM  | PM  | PM  | PM  | PM  | PM  | PM  | PM  | PM  | PM  | PM  | PM  | PM  | PM  | PM  | PM  | PM  | PM  | PM  | PM  | PM  | PM  | PM  | PM  | PM  | PM  | PM  | PM  | PM  | PM  | PM  | PM  | PM  | PM  | PM  | PM  | PM  |
|------|------|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|
| 5    | 5    | 5   | 5   | 5   | 5   | 5   | 5   | 5   | 5   | 5   | 5   | 5   | 5   | 5   | 5   | 5   | 5   | 5   | 5   | 5   | 5   | 5   | 5   | 5   | 5   | 5   | 5   | 5   | 5   | 5   | 5   | 5   | 5   | 5   | 5   | 5   | 5   | 5   | 5   |

**Note:** DIE (MFA/Department European Integration), FIN (Ministry of Finance), PM (Prime Ministers' Office), EU (EU Institutions), ATH (Emb. Athens), BLN (Emb. Berlin), BDP (Emb. Budapest), BRU (Emb. Brussels), BCR (Emb. Bucharest), BTL (Emb. Bratislava), DUB (Emb. Dublin), HEL (Emb. Helsinki), COP (Embassy Copenhagen), LON (Emb. London), LIS (Emb. Lisbon), LJIU (Embassy Ljubljiana), LUX (Emb. Luxembourg), MAD (Emb. Madrid), NIC (Emb. Nicosia), PAR (Emb. Paris), PRA (Emb. Prague), ROM (Emb. Rome), STO (Emb. Stockholm), SOF (Emb. Sofia), TAL (Emb. Tallinn), VAL (Emb. Valletta), VIL (Emb. Vilnius), WAR (Emb. Warsaw), VIE (Emb. Vienna), GRE (Gov. Greece), GER (Gov. Germany), HUN (Gov. Hungary), BEL (Gov. Belgium), RUM (Gov. Rumania), SLO (Gov. Slovenia), SLOV (Gov. Slovakia), IRC (Gov. Ireland), FNL (Gov. Finland), DEN (Gov. Denmark), UK (Gov. United Kingdom), POR (Gov. Portugal), SLV (Gov. Slovenia), LUX (Gov. Luxembourg), SPA (Gov. Spain), CYP (Gov. Cyprus), FRA (gov. France), CZE (Gov. Czech Rep.), EST (Gov. Estonia), ITA (Gov. Italy), SWE (Gov. Sweden), BUL (Gov. Bulgaria), LAT (Gov. Latvia), MAL (Gov. Malta), LIT (Gov. Lithuania), POL (Gov. Poland), AUS (Gov. Austria).
In order to examine how the actors contributed to the Dutch coalition-building effort, it is useful to look at the distance from the co-ordinating actor. How frequently did the co-ordinating entity interact directly with other governments and embassies in order to get the information required, clarify the Dutch negotiating position and build coalitions? To answer this question, the distance — expressed as the level of interaction — of all actors to the Department for European Integration has been measured. These figures can be deducted from Table 1a and Table 1b, which represent the frequency of interaction between each pair of actors, based on the average of the sum of the scores given by the respondents. This gives the following overview, as presented in Table 2.

Table 2 shows that the Department for European Integration interacted most frequently (several times a week) with the ministry of Finance, the ministry of Economic Affairs and the Permanent Representation in Brussels. There was also frequent direct contact (once a week to several times a month) with the German and Danish government, with the embassies in Berlin and Paris and with the Prime Minister’s Office. In the third group (once a month to once every quarter) we find direct contacts with other governments of the ‘Likeminded Group’ and with Poland as the leader of the ‘Friends of Cohesion Group’. Among the embassies in this group we find those that are situated mostly within larger Member States or in a country holding the EU presidency. The Department for European Integration interacted with the other 32 actors only on a much less frequent basis.

The structure of the whole network can also be presented as a graph. This not only reflects the distance of actors to the most central actor, but includes all reported relationships among the 58 actors. To organize these relational data, use can be made of software based on mathematical graph theory. For this article, the computer software program Pajek has been used for numerical analysis and visualization of the network. This can generate an optimal layout of a network, based on systematic principles for network drawing. A graph represents the structure of a network; all it needs for this is a set of nodes (actors) and a set of lines (relations) where each line connects two nodes. The distance between nodes in the graph expresses the strength of a tie as closely as possible. Because social network analysis focuses on relations, a drawing should position nodes according

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Distance</th>
<th>Actor</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Ministry of Finance, Ministry of Economic Affairs, Permanent Representation to the EU</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Prime Minister’s Office, German Government, Danish Government, Embassy Berlin, Embassy Paris</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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to their ties: nodes that are closely connected should be drawn closer together than nodes that are less closely related. The network (Figure 1) has been drafted based on the reported data and calculated in Pajek with the command Energy > Kamada-Kawai > Free. This is a common algorithm for automatic layout generation, with the effect of positioning the nodes in a graph in a two-dimensional space. It takes account of the centrality of a point (an actor) within a network as well as the distances (relations) between actors. It draws nodes with greater centrality to more central positions in the drawing and pulls together different connected nodes depending on the strength of the ties (relationships) between them. The advantage of a graph is that it visualizes all the data into a single picture of the network, which makes it easier to grasp than long tables with separate data. Figure 1 depicts the graph of the Dutch coalition-building network for the MFF.

The network graph (Figure 1) largely reflects the findings presented in Table 2. However, it is not solely based on the distance to the co-ordinating actor, but also takes into consideration the distance between other actors. The graph clearly depicts the ministries in The Hague and the Permanent Representation in Brussels as the most central players in the Dutch coalition-building network. It shows furthermore that relations with the
governments of Germany, the UK and Denmark occupy a central position in the network, as do the Dutch embassies in Berlin and Paris. It is clear that relations with Germany occupy a very central position in the Dutch coalition-building network, either directly with its government or through the Dutch embassy in Berlin. This is typical of the Dutch position within the EU, which is rather close to its neighbour, the biggest Member State. Relations with France and the UK also play a central role, the first through direct contact with the British government, the second mainly through the Dutch embassy in Paris. France is the only large Member State for which contact through the Dutch embassy was more frequent than contact directly between the capitals. A probable explanation is the perceived higher cultural difference with this country compared to Germany and the UK, as was pointed out by a Dutch negotiator in The Hague.\(^3\) The common denominator is that these three countries in the centre of the network – Germany, France and UK – are the largest Member States in the Union, as well as members of the like-minded coalition – although France effectively left this coalition in the later phase of the negotiations. Smaller like-minded countries – apart from Denmark, which held the EU presidency during an important period of the negotiations – are situated further away from the core.

Relations with Member States which were not part of the like-minded coalition were in general less intense and primarily channelled through the bilateral embassies. The exception is Poland, the largest Member State in and the leader of the opposing coalition, with whom contacts with the capital and the Dutch embassy in Warsaw were relatively frequent. Poland also held the half-yearly EU presidency during part of the negotiations. The relations with Spain, the other larger Member State in the opposing coalition, were mainly maintained through the Dutch embassy in Madrid, which interacted relatively frequently with The Hague. Like Denmark, Cyprus and Ireland also held the EU presidency during part of the negotiations, which could explain their taking a more central position in the network than would be expected when only taking into account their size and coalition affiliation. Least frequent were relations with smaller Member States which were not part of the like-minded coalition.

With regard to the EU institutions, their relatively modest position in the network stands out. Several explanations can be given. This study focuses on the period from the start of the Council negotiations and not on the preparatory phase of the proposals, where the European Commission normally fulfils a central role. The European Council president played a bigger role during the concluding phase of the negotiations, but the respondents were asked about their average contact frequency over the whole negotiating period. The role of ‘Brussels’ is also expected to be more limited in negotiations which deal with so-called ‘grand bargains’ (Moravcsik, 1993), which are more intergovernmental in character and touch upon fundamental questions of power within the EU. The role of EU institutions can be expected to be more prominent in negotiations of a more supranational nature and those that have to do with regulatory day-to-day decision-making in the Council (Keukeleire, 2003). It could well be that the responsibility and room for maneuver for the Permanent Representation in Brussels would also be larger in these cases. As a respondent at the Dutch Permanent Representation pointed out, the MFF negotiation was largely handled from The Hague, which had formed a special team to deal with the issue, leaving a smaller role for the ‘multilateral embassy’ in Brussels.

\(^3\) Interview, 10 June 2013.
than in general. Since the respondents at the bilateral embassies were requested to mention a limited number of negotiations on which their embassy had spent most of its time, one of which was the MFF, it can vice versa be safely assumed that their role during the MFF negotiations was in fact bigger than in most other negotiations.

V. Appreciation of Information

With the aim to give not only a quantitative but also a qualitative description of the ties in the network, four resource persons involved in the co-ordination of the Dutch negotiating position – working at the ministry of Foreign Affairs, the ministry of Finance and the Prime Minister’s Office – were requested to value the information received from the other actors in the network. They were asked, independently from each other, to fill out a table. They could give the following scores: 1) no importance or no information, 2) nice to know, 3) important, 4) crucial. Based on the average score for each actor in the network, an aggregate score was composed for each category, such as bilateral embassies, governments and Brussels-based actors. The information coming from Brussels was rated as ‘crucial’, as was the information received through direct contacts with the governments of the EU-3 (Germany, France, UK). The average score for information received through direct contacts with other governments in general was graded as ‘important’ (3). Information coming from embassies in the EU-3 (Berlin, Paris and London) was also considered ‘important’ (3). The input from the embassies in the EU-6 (EU-3 plus Rome, Madrid and Warsaw) and those from the embassies in countries with the EU presidency was valued with an average of 2.5 between ‘nice to know’ and ‘important’. The average score of the information provided by bilateral embassies in general was graded as ‘nice to know’ (2). The results are presented in Table 3.

During background interviews, the officials all underlined the importance of direct contacts with other capitals and the information they received through these channels. One of them remarked that the contact between heads of state and government is very close, as is that between their collaborators. ‘It is difficult for an embassy to add something to this as they are somewhat sidelined.’ There was, for example, excellent contact between the office of the Prime Minister and the Kanzleramt in Berlin, as well as with the Prime Ministers’ offices in Copenhagen, London and Stockholm. As a diplomat at a bilateral embassy conceded:

Embassies are sometimes trying to look for a role. But if there are good direct contacts or the country you’re posted in doesn’t play an important part in the discussions, one should just accept that there is no need to interfere.

A diplomat from a small bilateral embassy adds that it was not always easy to contribute something to the discussions, since they were quite technical – something which is not

4 Interview, 15 July 2013.
5 Background interviews with the four resource persons involved in the co-ordination of the Dutch negotiation position were held on 10 June, 20 June, 10 July and 17 July 2013. Interviews were also held with several diplomats at Dutch embassies on 19 June, 21 June, 2 July and 15 July 2013.
6 Interview, 10 July 2013.
7 Interview, 21 June 2013.
restricted to the MFF talks: ‘There are a lot of complicated and technical financial dossiers on the EU agenda nowadays. The Hague really has to provide clear guidance as to what it expects from a small embassy’. However, the officials in The Hague all stress that embassies in the large Member States mattered most and that they were able to provide useful information:

> In order to contribute something, you need time to study the files and to get a grip on the technical details. Particularly in Berlin, Paris and London we had people who had both the time and expertise to do this. The embassy in Rome, for example, also provided good information, although that country played a less important role in the negotiations.

Bilateral embassies were able to contribute to the negotiations in three different ways. First, they acted as facilitators between The Hague and other governments in order to establish initial contacts and organize visits. When the taskforce in The Hague wanted to organize meetings for the ‘like-minded’ countries, embassies provided missing names and contact details of responsible co-ordinators from those governments. The embassies provided some background to their host government as to the responsibilities and intentions of the taskforce. The embassy also organized meetings during visits of the taskforce or high-level officials to particular Member States. After that, it was easy for officials in The Hague to follow up on those contacts themselves and ‘just give them a regular telephone call’. Second, the embassies provided situational awareness as to what was going on within a Member State. They informed The Hague, for example, of meetings that the ‘Friends of Cohesion Group’ organized in a Member State. The embassies in Bratislava and Warsaw were mentioned as examples of alerting The Hague to these meetings. Embassies also tried to look at specific interests behind the official position that a government communicated to EU partners and in Brussels. This additional layer, or additional ‘chess board’ as an official in The Hague calls it, provided deepening.

> From the embassy in Berlin we sometimes received an assessment of the German position and the points of view of various ministries behind this position. This is particularly relevant in countries where the EU position is not always as well coordinated. It is also relevant in countries in which a president or head of government has powerful

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Table 3: Value of information received

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Information from</th>
<th>Value (average)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Permanent Representation, EU institutions</td>
<td>4 (crucial)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Governments EU-3</td>
<td>4 (crucial)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Governments EU-27</td>
<td>3 (important)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embassies EU-3</td>
<td>3 (important)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embassies EU-6</td>
<td>2.5 (between important and nice to know)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embassies EU presidency</td>
<td>2.5 (between important and nice to know)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embassies EU-27</td>
<td>2 (nice to know)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

8 Interview, 2 July 2013.
9 Interview, 20 June 2013.
10 Interview, 10 June 2013.
11 Interview, 10 June 2013.
prerogatives, such as France and Germany. Here positions can suddenly shift, without the need for much inter-governmental co-ordination, in which case a well-informed embassy can give a timely warning.  

A diplomat at the embassy in Paris says she looked not only at the positions of the office of the President (Élysée), the Prime Minister (Matignon), the ministry of Finance (Bercy) and the ministry of Foreign Affairs (Quay d’Orsay), but also at Datar, the organization responsible for the implementation of the cohesion funds in France, which represents the interests of the regions. Some embassies looked at these internal differences and suggested possibilities to their capital for negotiating room with a particular Member State. The Hague thought it also useful to receive information on debates in parliament and the role of opposition parties in Member States with an important role in the negotiations. It was for example appreciated, in the run-up to the French presidential elections, to be informed of the ideas of Socialist candidate François Hollande on the EU budget. Also, a diplomat from the embassy in Berlin stressed: ‘I don’t just look at what the German ministry of Foreign Affairs thinks, but also at the direction in which discussions within the CDU and the SPD develop’. Third, embassies also functioned as lobbyists. Several embassies considered it their role, as requested by The Hague, to regularly bring the Dutch position to the attention of their government contacts. ‘The power is in repetition. This is something you can do very well as an embassy. In Brussels you can’t always repeat your own bilateral concerns.’

Notwithstanding these remarks, direct contact with other capitals was described as ‘a more equal exchange of information’; embassies did not participate in the meetings of the ‘Likeminded Group’ and were never ‘as well informed on the state of play of the negotiations’ as The Hague. As one official from a line ministry replied to the question of whether there was room for improvement as to the contribution of bilateral embassies: ‘In an ideal world, you would have liked a bit more information coming from embassies in member states that were not part of the coalition, but this would probably not have made a significant difference in the end’.

Conclusions

The foregoing has illustrated that bilateral relations can indeed play an important role in EU negotiations. The case study on multiple bilateralism during the MFF presented here reveals that the Netherlands drew on a wide network of bilateral ties, outside of the formal negotiations going on in the Council in Brussels, in order to co-ordinate its coalition-building efforts. This contact with other capitals and through embassies could be very frequent during the negotiating process. A qualitative assessment of the information received through these bilateral contacts shows that some of the direct interaction between The Hague and governments in other capitals, namely those within the largest Member States, provided crucial input for the Dutch negotiating effort or were at least, with regard to most other governments, valued as important.

12 Interview, 20 June 2013.
13 Interview, 19 June 2013.
14 Interview, 21 June 2013.
15 Interview, 19 June 2013.
16 Interview, 20 June 2013.
This article on multiple bilateralism was particularly concerned with the role of bilateral embassies, as a well-known instrument to maintain bilateral relations, within an EU negotiation process. The assumption which can be found in some of the literature on the role of bilateral embassies within the EU – and as suggested by ministries of Foreign Affairs – that these bilateral embassies generally play an important role in the process of EU negotiations is not supported by the findings in this study. Information received through direct contact with other capitals was valued higher than that received from bilateral embassies. Their contribution to the MFF negotiation, which was identified by themselves as among the negotiations they had put most of their efforts in, was relatively modest. Only a few embassies, namely those in the largest EU Member States, were able to play a more important role and direct contact with Member States’ capitals was considered to be the predominant channel for success. Some of the qualitative research in this article indicates that the particular added value of bilateral embassies can be found in other functions – such as facilitating, lobbying and providing situational awareness – often before formal negotiations in the Council have actually started. This article did not touch upon yet other potential roles of bilateral embassies outside the realm of EU negotiations, such as economic and trade activities, cultural co-operation, consular assistance and public diplomacy. However, the results of this study show that, for most intra-EU embassies, claims that would justify their existence mainly by the input they provide to ongoing EU negotiations would be hard to substantiate.

The increased attention for the role of bilateralism within the process of European integration – whether it is called multiple bilateralism, embedded bilateralism or intra-EU diplomacy – will hopefully lead to further theoretical and empirical studies. These could deal both with the effect of EU integration on bilateral relations and how these are ‘embedded’ – including other examples than the French–German co-operation – as with the manner in which bilateral relations contribute to EU negotiation processes. It would be helpful if these last type of studies would also focus on negotiations which are more supranational in character, so as to enable broader comparisons of the role of bilateralism within EU coalition-building. More inclusive research projects would be welcome, which could map the relations from the perspective of all 28 Member States and the way these interact both in Brussels and beyond. These would undoubtedly reveal an even more complex reality with regard to the way the European integration process in general, and EU coalition-building in particular, functions in practice.

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