

Blackmailing and Identity Profiling? The Behaviour of Populist Radical Right Governments in EU Development Policy

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Abstract

EU development policy has in recent years become more contested and politicised. One key factor driving this trend is the increasing influence of populist radical right parties (PRRPs). Previous studies have focused on PRRPs as opposition parties. This contribution breaks new ground by exploring the behaviour of PRRP-led governments in EU development policy. More specifically, the article analyses how and to what extent this behaviour is characterised by “unpolitics,” an approach to undermining EU policymaking. We define “cross-policy blackmailing” and “identity profiling” as two potential strategies of unpolitics in EU development policy and probe these in two case studies. The first case concerns the New European Consensus on Development and the second is the EU’s positioning in the negotiations and signing of the Samoa Agreement. In the first case, we find that PRRP-led governments fundamentally rejected the decision-making rules as well as the norms on migration, gender, and sexual and reproductive health rights, using a strategy of identity profiling. In the second case, PRRP-led governments significantly stalled the conclusion of the agreement by combining cross-policy blackmailing and identity profiling. Based on this analysis, we generalise on the scope conditions of unpolitics in EU development policy.

Keywords

development policy; European Union; gender; migration; populism; populist radical right parties; unpolitics

1. Introduction

In recent years, the EU has faced challenges from within as some member states have deliberately undermined EU decision-making processes or positioned themselves against EU values. In particular,

governments led by populist radical right parties (PRRPs) have challenged the EU on migration and asylum, contested the EU's response towards Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and questioned trade, security, and climate policy, or the European integration process more generally (Biedenkopf et al., 2021; Costa, 2019; Csehi, 2023; Koß & Séville, 2020; Petri et al., 2020).

PRRPs have gained electoral support across Europe since the end of the 1990s and, in particular, since 2015 (Rooduijn et al., 2023). PRRPs can influence EU decision-making indirectly by pressuring mainstream parties to adjust their position, or they can exert a more direct influence once they become a governing party. Most research thus far has analysed their indirect influence as opposition parties, reflecting the fact that until the mid-2010s only a few PRRPs had assumed governmental responsibility.

In this article, we focus on PRRPs as governing parties, analysing their behaviour concerning EU development policy. Previous studies suggest that some PRRP-led governments, such as the Fidesz government in Hungary or the Law and Justice (PiS) government in Poland, have been “troublemakers” in European development policy (Szent-Iványi & Kugiel, 2020; see also Bergmann et al., 2021; Hackenesch et al., 2021, 2022; Hammerschmidt et al., 2022; Suzuki, 2023). The Hungarian government, for instance, has, on various occasions, actively objected to positive wording on migration in Council of the EU (hereafter Council) statements on EU development policy (Szent-Iványi & Kugiel, 2020). However, the strategies and motivations behind this and other instances of obstructive behaviour in EU development policy have not been systematically studied.

This article addresses this research gap and analyses whether, and to what extent, the behaviour of PRRP-led governments in EU development policy constitutes a case of “unpolitics.” We follow this thematic issue's definition of unpolitics as an obstructive approach to undermining EU policymaking. From an empirical point of view, the presence of unpolitics in EU development policy appears counterintuitive. First, an occurrence of unpolitics might be unlikely, as development policy is considered by PRRP-led governments of limited relevance. Furthermore, development policy is a low-salience policy field, which gives PRRPs (as well as other political parties) limited possibilities to mobilise electoral support. Indeed, earlier research indicates that EU member states with PRRP-led governments hardly mention development policy in their national government statements or coalition agreements. By extension, they also do not engage much in EU development policy processes in Brussels (Bergmann et al., 2021; Lightfoot & Szent-Iványi, 2014). Second, development policy is an area that involves limited legislative action and is mainly focused on the financing of cooperation programmes in countries in the Global South, which at first glance seems to offer few opportunities for disruption.

Our empirical analysis investigates the behaviour of PRRP-led governments in two EU development policy processes: the negotiation of a New European Consensus on Development, conducted between December 2016 and May 2017, and the preparation of the EU's negotiating directives and subsequent signing of the Samoa Agreement with the Organisation of African, Caribbean and Pacific States (OACPS). The negotiating directives for the Samoa Agreement were prepared during the first half of 2018, while the negotiations on the legal nature and subsequent signing of the agreement took place from December 2020 to April 2023. Both the New European Consensus on Development and the Samoa Agreement were among the main EU development policy priorities during the Juncker and Von der Leyen Commissions (European Commission, 2014, 2019).

Since 2016, PRRPs have been part of governments in more than 10 EU member states: Austria (2017–2019), Bulgaria (2017–2021), Croatia (2015–2017), Denmark (2015–2019), Estonia (2019–2021), Finland (2015–2017; 2023–), Greece (2015–2019), Hungary (2014–), Italy (2018–2019, 2022–), Poland (2015–2023), Romania (2017–), Slovakia (2016–), and Slovenia (2020–2022; Rooduijn et al., 2023). Our analysis focuses on the behaviour of the Polish and Hungarian governments in the negotiations of the New European Consensus on Development and the Samoa Agreement, as the PiS and Fidesz governments were the only PRRPs in power throughout the 2016–2023 period of analysis and were active in both processes. Moreover, they were the only ones leading the government, whereas in the other cases, PRRPs served as junior partners in coalition governments. The unit of analysis is thus the behaviour of the Fidesz and PiS governments in the negotiations of the New European Consensus on Development and the Samoa Agreement.

The case studies are based on two types of data sources. We comprehensively reviewed publicly available documents, academic literature, and media reporting about the two cases. In addition, we conducted three semi-structured interviews with policymakers from EU institutions and one member state in December 2023 and January 2024 (interview 1, EU official; interview 2, EU member state official; interview 3, EU official). The interviewees were selected for having had a key responsibility in either or both of the policy processes. Building on these different data sources, we reconstructed the negotiating behaviour of the two PRRP-led governments for the different negotiation phases in the two case studies and analysed how PRRP-led governments use strategies of “unpolitics,” as developed in our conceptual framework.

To analyse the engagement of PRRP-led governments in EU development policy, we conceptualise two main strategies used by PRRP-led governments to undermine EU policymaking in this area, namely “cross-policy blackmailing” and “identity profiling.” We conceive cross-policy blackmailing as a strategy whereby PRRP-led governments block the making of development policy to extract gains in an unrelated policy domain. Identity profiling involves contesting norms and values and making attempts to upload the PRRPs’ own norms to the EU level. We explore three scope conditions that can explain the choice of strategy, namely potential material returns, normative dissonance, and the salience of negotiated policy documents.

The remainder of the article is structured as follows. First, we conceptualise the aforementioned strategies of unpolitics and the scope conditions under which these strategies may be applied. We subsequently analyse how these strategies are employed in the two cases. Finally, we draw broader conclusions for future research on the role of PRRPs in EU decision-making.

2. Conceptualising the Dynamics of “Unpolitics” in EU Development Policy

Following the definition introduced by Mudde (2007), PRRPs are political parties that share three constitutive elements: nativism/nationalism, authoritarianism, and populism. As a result of these core features, PRRPs are generally sceptical about European integration. Put differently, cultural diversity across the EU and supranational decision-making, which are inherent to the European integration process, run counter to PRRP core preferences (Vasilopoulou, 2018). Despite these commonalities, PRRPs differ in their level of Euroscepticism; individual PRRPs can change their positions over time or even signal softer and harder positions on the EU to different audiences at the same time (McDonnell & Werner, 2019).

Being generally critical towards supranational decision-making and European integration per se, we expect PRRP-led governments to position themselves in the EU by engaging in unpolitics (see also Ripoll Servent & Zaun, 2024). The concept of unpolitics (Zaun & Ripoll Servent, 2023, p. 654, building on Taggart, 2018) was originally inspired and informed by insights from studies of asylum and migration policy and has been defined as:

The active efforts of populist governments to maintain the EU in a state of permanent crisis, on the one hand, and the willingness of mainstream governments to sacrifice policy reforms for the sake of maintaining a fragile equilibrium on EU integration, on the other hand.

As per Taggart (2018), unpolitics distinctly deviates from what is considered “normal politics” in the EU’s development policy. Traditionally, EU development policy has been characterised by a proactive involvement of a core group of states, in particular France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Spain, the Nordic countries, and the UK (before Brexit). A majority of member states engage much more selectively, or not at all (Carbone, 2015, pp. 900–901). Long-standing controversies and delays, or even blockages in decision-making, have been a clear exception in this policy domain, where decision-making has been shaped by consensus (Elgström, 2000, pp. 466–469). This might be related to the low priority many governments attribute to their own bilateral (national) development policies, but it is also linked to the fact that there is little legislation being adopted in EU development policy, except for the creation and revision of financial instruments. In other words, instances of “policymaking” in EU development policy are mostly limited to soft laws such as Council Conclusions and other non-binding statements (Orbie, 2020), which means that tangible implications for member states’ national development policies are limited.

We conceptualise two different strategies of unpolitics in this policy area: “cross-policy blackmailing” and “identity profiling.” We expect that the behaviour of PRRP-led governments in EU development policy is shaped by their core norms and interests and that their behaviour is often primarily motivated by interests unrelated to development policy. By engaging in cross-policy blackmailing, PRRP-led governments use development policy to extract (or unblock) material gains from the EU in other policy domains related to their core policy interests, whilst identity profiling instead focuses on shaping EU norms according to their preferences.

2.1. The Strategy of “Cross-Policy Blackmailing”

Despite the comparatively small amount of law-making involved in EU development policy, established EU bargaining practices such as issue linkages and side payments are brought into play. In the logic of issue linkage, member states that expect few benefits from a decision taken at the EU level on one issue, link it to another issue on which they have stronger preferences and expect gains, making their agreement to compromise on the first issue conditional on other member states’ willingness to compromise on the other issue (Moravcsik, 2018). In a similar vein, asking for side payments while threatening to block or veto a decision is common practice by governments that benefit least from a negotiated agreement with other member states (Moravcsik, 2018, pp. 1653–1654; Poast, 2013). Typically, such governments calculate the limit on side payments that can be negotiated without threatening the European integration process or its consensus-finding norm. An example of the use of issue linkages in EU development policy is the negotiations on the EU–Jordan Compact, in which the European Commission only managed to gain the

support of several EU member states by linking trade preferences granted to Jordan to the employment of Syrian refugees in the country (Vaagland, 2021, pp. 58–59). Another example is the French backing in the late 1990s for Germany’s policy preferences regarding Central and Eastern European countries, in exchange for Germany’s support for the conclusion of a new agreement with African, Caribbean, and Pacific states (ACP; Schieder et al., 2011).

While cross-policy blackmailing as a strategy of unpolitics may at first glance resemble established bargaining practices such as issue linkages and side payments (Moravcsik, 2018), it is fundamentally different and thus diverges from mainstream political behaviour. One fundamental difference of cross-policy blackmailing is that it involves unpredictable and erratic behaviour that may concern the content-related dimension of decision-making in the sense that PRRP-led governments obstruct negotiations on issues that other member states may not have expected to be controversial, and they may do this inconsistently in that they raise the same issue in one process but not in another. Cross-policy blackmailing may also involve references to conspiracy theories and other acts of disinformation, which renders it difficult for other member states to argue and engage in negotiations. There is also a temporal dimension of the unpredictability of cross-policy blackmailing in the sense that PRRP-led governments may not adhere to the regular timeline of intra-EU negotiations and may, for example, engage in cross-policy blackmailing even if the negotiation process has been formally concluded. Blocking decision-making processes can involve the rejection of compromise solutions, the purposeful delaying of decision-making processes, or veto threats, but it can also involve the contestation of established procedural norms. The primary target group of this obstructive behaviour are EU institutions and other EU member states from whom PRRP-led governments seek to extract concessions (Juncos & Pomorska, 2021).

We assume that PRRP-led governments adopt cross-policy blackmailing in response to the preferences they presume to be pursued by other member states to extract national gains. This strategy—and the very reason why we associate it with unpolitics—differs fundamentally from issue linkages in which two or more issues are jointly considered to find mutual agreement (Poast, 2013). PRRP-led governments show a transactional approach to foreign policy—following a “zero-sum worldview where all gains are relative and reciprocity is absent” (Bashirov & Yilmaz, 2020, p. 167)—and are only interested in short-term national gains while ignoring the potential long-term consequences of their actions. PRRP-led governments’ behaviour is guided by a different calculus from that employed in mainstream bargaining practices. As they are generally sceptical towards the European integration process (McDonnell & Werner, 2019; Vasilopoulou, 2018), we expect them not to shy away from outright undermining established EU decision-making processes if it advances their interests. Such undermining might be a welcome side-effect of their seeking to achieve a policy goal—or it could be a goal in itself, helping PRRP-led governments to enhance their profile in the domestic arena and mobilise their electorate. It can therefore be considered an instance of transgressive political behaviour, which is a key feature of populism (Aiolfi, 2022).

We would therefore expect that in terms of policy objectives, a cross-policy blackmailing strategy by a PRRP-led government would pursue relatively narrow policy goals related to the PRRPs’ core topics and interests. Since PRRP-led governments, by definition, tend to challenge the EU as a supranational polity, we would not expect them to reinforce it by agreeing to EU-wide legislation, but rather to extract distributive gains from the EU (Zaun & Ripoll Servent, 2023).

2.2. The Strategy of “Identity Profiling”

In EU development policy, it is not uncommon for a member state government to seek to profile themselves by advancing their specific agenda on the EU stage, or by trying to upload certain norms or ideas to the EU level. For example, Steingass (2018, pp. 149–180) illustrates how British government officials utilised the debate on aid effectiveness principles at the EU level during the 2010s to promote nationally relevant norms of accountability and transparency.

Identity profiling, the second type of unpolitics behaviour we conceptualise here, is, however, different from these mainstream practices in that it primarily serves to defend a PRRP’s identity from being associated with (EU) policies that are deemed to be non-compatible. In turn, such behaviour is likely to differ in intensity from mainstream practice, and may explicitly involve transgressive elements, as it relates to the core identity of the PRRP.

We expect a PRRP to engage in unpolitics behaviour on norms and policy issues in EU development policy when there is a strong dissonance between these norms and issues and the ideology and identity of the PRRP. Nationalism, anti-immigration, and traditional family values are core norms embraced by PRRPs (Vasilopoulou & Halikiopoulou, 2015). In our understanding, identity profiling thereby becomes a strategy for a PRRP to promote or defend its key norms, protect its citizens from foreign influences that go against these norms, and mobilise PRRP supporters against the EU. Underlying this motivation to protect the core features of their identity from external influence is a strong emphasis on state sovereignty, which is an inherent characteristic of populist parties more broadly (Lehoczki, 2024).

While enhancing their own political profile, PRRPs engage in the “othering” of fellow EU member states, which are portrayed as seeking to weaken PRRP-led governments’ main role of protecting the will of “the people” against European or international “elites.” As with cross-policy blackmailing, the PRRPs’ key target group is their domestic audience. PRRP-led governments seek to use EU-level debates to shine a spotlight on their political profile as the protectors of the key norms and values of “the people.”

Migration, gender equality, and sexual and reproductive health rights (SRHR) are key targets of identity politics and are often the focus of identity profiling (Badell, 2023). We expect PRRP-led governments to engage in tactics to delay policy processes—haggling over details and using their veto. In contrast to cross-policy blackmailing, however, PRRP-led governments who adopt the strategy of identity profiling are not looking for material returns. Instead, they seek to legitimise and reinforce the self-image of the PRRP in the EU and amongst their domestic constituents. In such instances, we assume that PRRP-led governments are less willing to broker compromise agreements than when engaged in cross-policy blackmailing—unless other member state governments are willing to accommodate their normative positions. If PRRP-led governments have little interest in ensuring the general functioning of EU institutions and decision-making processes, they can veto or delay the adoption of Council Conclusions, international agreements, or other policy statements until their preferences for the framing of key norms and concepts are adopted.

Consequently, we expect that identity profiling often results in delays or the failure to adopt joint statements, which erodes the time-conscious and concerted signals these were supposed to emit vis-à-vis European citizens or other international actors. For PRRP-led governments, supporting EU-level

compromises on party identity issues could backfire at the domestic level, where this could be interpreted as the government giving in to EU pressure. Inversely, blocking such compromises can be presented as defending traditional values that are contested by “elites” in Brussels and other member states. Identity profiling can also be observed in the analysis by Vaagland and Chmiel (2023) that describes how the Polish government instrumentalised what the authors refer to as “parochial attitudes,” which involve a highly selective application of solidarity to some groups while withholding it from others.

2.3. Scope Conditions

We anticipate that the following three scope conditions influence the (non-)occurrence of the two strategies of unpolitics in EU development policy. *Material returns* apply to cross-policy blackmailing and *normative dissonance* to identity profiling; the *salience of negotiated policy documents or issues* shapes both strategies:

Material returns: We expect PRRP governments to engage in cross-policy blackmailing when decisions on the allocation of funds are pending. Such blackmailing tends to be more effective but also more risky when the material returns of other EU member states are likely also to be affected, such as during budget negotiations.

Normative dissonance: We expect PRRP governments to engage in identity profiling when there is a strong dissonance between the statements to be adopted by the EU and their own normative standpoints. Such standpoints are typically linked to their core identity, such as issues related to migration, gender, or SRHR. PRRPs may not only challenge the substantive framing of norms and policy issues but also claim that the EU institutions have “hidden agendas.”

Salience of negotiated policy document or issue: We assume that the salience of the policy process to other stakeholders influences whether PRRP-led governments engage in identity profiling or cross-policy blackmailing. The more importance other member states or the EU institutions attach to the policy document or policy issue, the more it is that identity profiling or blackmailing would occur. With regard to identity profiling, this is because normative statements in such documents are expected to pertain for a long time and are of a defining character for the overarching policy field. Concerning blackmailing, PRRP-led governments will look for higher salience issues to increase their chances of extracting financial benefits in other policy areas.

3. Case Studies

Two case studies serve to explore the use of the two strategies of unpolitics in EU development policy. As with other domains of EU external relations, development policy is characterised by decision-making processes intended to reach a consensus. For a long time, decision-making on EU development policy was dominated by those EU member states that have significant bilateral development cooperation programmes, whereas member states with limited bilateral programmes of their own were less engaged (Lightfoot & Szent-Iványi, 2014). Our two case studies show how these dynamics have changed with the rise of PRRP-led governments. During the negotiation of the New European Consensus on Development in 2016–2017, both the Polish and the Hungarian governments used identity profiling to influence core norms included in this policy statement. During the preparation of a negotiation mandate in 2018, and between 2020 and 2023, when EU actors

debated the legal nature and signing of the agreement, the Hungarian and Polish governments sought to engage in both cross-policy blackmailing and identity profiling. In using these strategies, they did not follow established decision-making processes to reach consensus but instead behaved in unpredictable ways, used the threat of veto, sometimes erratically, and even fostered conspiracy theories about the EU's "real motives."

3.1. The New European Consensus on Development

The first version of the European Consensus on Development was adopted back in 2005, a year after the "big bang enlargement." It was an important tripartite policy strategy, endorsed by the Commission, Council, European Parliament, and, finally, by the European External Action Service (EEAS) in 2014. The Consensus outlined shared norms, standards, and objectives for European development policy. While not legally binding, the formal endorsement of the EU institutions gave it a much higher political relevance compared to Council Conclusions. In practical terms, the Consensus guided the reform of the EU's development instruments in the Multiannual Financial Framework (2007–2013). It also had a key "arbitrating" role in political discussions by reflecting a minimum ambition and was frequently used as agreed common language for Council Conclusions and joint positions (Bergmann et al., 2019).

The adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Paris Climate Agreement in 2015 necessitated the preparation of a new Consensus. At the start of the Juncker Commission in November 2014, the Commissioner for Development Policy was mandated to prepare a revision. Following a public consultation, the Commission published a Communication that outlined a text proposal (European Commission, 2016). This became the basis for an "informal trilogue" (informal because the ordinary legislative procedure did not apply) during which the European Parliament, Commission, and Council sought to reach an agreement on the statement. The joint statement was subsequently adopted and presented at the European Development Days in June 2017, titled the New European Consensus on Development (European Union, 2017), replacing its 2005 predecessor.

3.1.1. Positioning of PRRP-led Governments During the Negotiations: Identity Profiling

The Council position for the informal trilogue was prepared in the Council Working Party on Development Cooperation (CODEV), where different EU member states made proposals on how to revise parts of the text to better reflect their specific policy priorities. The Fidesz and PiS governments engaged in identity profiling and stood out in threatening to veto the entire Consensus if the text relating to migration, gender, and SRHR was not changed to better reflect their preferences (Chmiel, 2018, p. 21). Hungary went as far as registering a general dislike of the text during a meeting of the Committee of Permanent Representatives of Member States of the EU (COREPER; interview 2).

Concerning migration, several member states pushed for more critical language compared to the Commission proposal. In light of the sudden increase in refugees and migrants in 2015, several member states called for a direct link on how development policy should be used to stem migration pressures (interview 2). The Polish and Hungarian governments, however, stood out in terms of how they presented their positions and by threatening to veto the entire document if the wording was not changed. Hungary argued that no positive development effects of migration should be mentioned and that, instead, emphasis should be placed on the risks and threats of migration.

A comparison of the Commission proposal (European Commission, 2016) and the final version of the Consensus (European Union, 2017) shows that the Fidesz government was at least partly successful in shaping the language related to migration (Table 1). The Commission’s desire to present the statement at the European Development Days in June 2017 prompted it to bilaterally discuss and agree on wording changes with Hungary, which subsequently were presented by the Presidency to the informal trilogue for agreement (interview 1). The Commission proposal starts with a longer paragraph on how migration makes a major contribution to inclusive growth and sustainable development (for this and the following refer to Table 1). By contrast, in the final version of the Consensus, key emphasis is placed on member states’ sovereignty in determining the number of refugees that are admitted, and the various challenges of migration for host countries are highlighted, whereas positive contributions to development are watered down. Moreover, the final version of the Consensus mentions generic problems associated with irregular migration, which was also not in the Commission’s proposal.

In addition to migration, both the PiS and Fidesz governments positioned themselves as protectors of what they consider traditional (family) values, and engaged in identity profiling to change the language on gender as well as SRHR (Szent-Iványi & Kugiel, 2020, p. 133). Regarding gender, Poland was successful in—at least partially—uploading its understanding of gender equality as equality between women and men. Whereas the Commission proposal focused on strengthening the role of women and girls, the final version of the Consensus speaks more generally about “equality between men and women of all ages” (European Union, 2017, p. 13; see also Table 2). Moreover, the text no longer depicts the EU as a “global leader in promoting gender equality,” and references to the EU Gender Action Plan (2016–2020) that were made in the Commission proposal were dropped (Table 2).

The wording on SRHR was one of the issues that remained controversial until the very end of the negotiations (interview 2). For the Polish and Hungarian governments, two issues were particularly controversial: references to giving women rights over their sexual and reproductive health, and references to sexual and reproductive education (interview 2). However, compared to the language on migration and to some extent gender, Poland and Hungary were less successful in shaping the final wording of the Consensus regarding SRHR (Table 2). Although the reference to sexual orientation was removed from the box on gender proposed by the Commission, another reference remained in paragraph 16 of the final statement, and a new paragraph 34 was added with a longer outline of the EU’s objectives related to SRHR.

Table 1. The framing of migration in the Commission’s proposal and the final text of the New European Consensus on Development.

| Proposal (European Commission, 2016) | Final text (European Union, 2017) |
|---|---|
| Migration is a complex, global, long-lasting phenomenon requiring a carefully designed, balanced, evidence-based and sustainable policy response. The 2030 Agenda clearly recognises the positive contribution of migration and mobility to inclusive growth and sustainable development. (para 56) | Migration is a complex, global, long-lasting phenomenon requiring a carefully designed, balanced, evidence-based and sustainable policy response which shall respect national competences, and in particular not affect the right of member states under Article 79(5) TFEU to determine volumes of admission of third-country nationals coming from third countries to their territory in order to seek work. (para. 39) |

Table 2. SRHR and gender in the Commission’s proposal and the final text of the New European Consensus on Development.

| Proposal (European Commission, 2016) | Final text (European Union, 2017) |
|---|---|
| The EU and its Member States will vigorously promote the protection and fulfilment of women’s and girls’ rights. (para. 31) | The EU remains committed to the promotion, protection and fulfilment of all human rights and... (para. 39) |
| Women and girls continue to be deprived of rights, resources and voice....The EU is a global leader in promoting gender equality and women and girls’ empowerment in its external relations, particularly through the comprehensive, results-oriented EU Gender Action Plan 2016–2020. (gender box) | Equality between women and men of all ages is critical for sustainable development....The EU and its Member States will ensure that the gender perspective is systematically mainstreamed across all policies as a key contribution to the successful achievement of the SDGs. (gender box) |
| (no specific text proposal in the Communication) | The EU reaffirms its commitment to the promotion, protection and fulfilment of the right of every individual to have full control over, and decide freely and responsibly on matters related to their sexuality and sexual and reproductive health, free from discrimination, coercion and violence. The EU further stresses the need for universal access to quality and affordable comprehensive sexual and reproductive health information, education, including comprehensive sexuality education, and health-care services. (para. 34) |

3.1.2. Scope Conditions: Normative Dissonance and Salience

Normative dissonance between the Commission proposal and the positions of the PiS and Fidesz governments on migration, gender, and SRHR were clearly high. Whereas the Commission put a strong emphasis on the development benefits of migration, to Hungary, national sovereignty in determining admission of migrants, active migration management, and explicit mention of the assumed security challenges were key (interview 1).

The *salience* of the New European Consensus on Development was high as it represents an important reference document and is unique to the policy field in being endorsed by four EU institutions. Despite its length and apparent lack of prioritisation, it has been relevant to European development policy as the lowest common denominator on which EU institutions and member states can agree and refer to when framing policy issues for the EU’s budget or when developing other sectoral strategies. PRRP-led governments thus had an interest in this document reflecting their norms and values. Moreover, the negotiations on the Consensus took place in parallel to international debates on the UN Global Compact for Migration, which Poland and Hungary—among other member states—rejected and refused to sign in 2018 (Badell, 2023). They were thus wary that language they objected to in the UN Global Compact for Migration would find its way through the backdoor into EU policy documents.

On the other hand, the EU institutions and those member states active in development policy had an interest in reaching an agreement on the new Consensus (Raunio & Wagner, 2021). For the Commission in particular—given that it took the initiative to prepare a new statement—a non-signing would have been a defeat. Time was an issue too, since the Commission pushed to have the statement ready by the European Development

Days in June 2017. Other EU member states who actively engaged in development policy at the EU level had an interest in demonstrating to their domestic constituents as well as partner countries that the EU is (still) able to agree on common objectives and principles in development policy (interview 1).

3.2. *Negotiating and Signing the Samoa Agreement*

Following the start of the Juncker Commission in 2014, EU policy debates started on how cooperation between the EU and the 78 ACP states was to be governed following the scheduled expiration of the Cotonou Agreement (2000–2020)—a legally binding cooperation framework for EU–ACP relations that had evolved from the Rome Treaty’s association policy and governed development funding and trade relations between the EU and the ACP group (Keijzer, 2020). Whilst promoting an open debate on reform options, the Commission was clear in its intentions to adopt another legally binding international agreement with the same group of states and managed the process to this effect (Chmiel, 2018; Keijzer & Schulting, 2019).

3.2.1. *Combining Cross-Policy Blackmailing and Identity Profiling*

EU member states used two main windows of opportunity to shape the negotiation process. First, member states engaged in the preparation of the EU’s negotiation directive in the Council in the first half of 2018. Once the directive was agreed, the negotiations were conducted between the chief negotiators of the EU and ACP, who reached a political deal in December 2020. Second, between 2021 and 2023, the political deal was taken back to the member states, who controversially debated with the Commission and EEAS on the legal nature of the agreement (EU competence versus mixed competence, which would require the ratification of the agreement by member states).

In 2018, during the preparation of the EU’s negotiating directives, the PiS and Fidesz governments both used identity profiling. During the deliberations in the Council working group, both governments remained rather quiet and hardly engaged. Only in May 2018, towards the very end of the process, when the negotiation mandate reached COREPER, did the PiS and Fidesz governments suddenly block the mandate, criticising, in particular, the provisions related to migration and SRHR (Keijzer & Schulting, 2019; Szent-Iványi & Kugiel, 2020, p. 132). Both governments argued that the negotiation mandate would erode their sovereignty via the backdoor of an agreement with developing countries, a conspiracy theory view that Hungary would reassert later in the negotiations (“FM Szijjártó,” 2021). Following a meeting of the Foreign Affairs Council, Hungary’s foreign minister publicly stated that the migration chapter would need to present legal migration as a security threat to Europe and that it would need to include the objective of stopping illegal migration to Europe before Hungary could sign off on the agreement (van Densky, 2018). While Poland did not join Hungary in blocking the negotiation mandate, it urged other EU ambassadors to find a solution at the 7 June 2018 COREPER meeting. However, in the following weeks, Poland suddenly raised its own reservations on SRHR. The negotiation mandate was subsequently adopted on 22 June 2018, with Poland making a unilateral declaration on SRHR (Carbone, 2022, p. 756; Chmiel, 2018, p. 22). Table 3 compares the European Commission’s (2017) recommendation and the negotiating directives (Council of the European Union, 2018) as adopted, and shows minimal differences concerning gender (removal of “migration status”) and an emphasis on national competencies relating to migration, while the text on SRHR is based on the agreed text in the New European Consensus on Development, as shown in Table 2 above. In particular, the additional text on migration appears to move towards the Hungarian government’s assumed concern that the agreement might infringe on its own migration policy.

Table 3. SRHR and migration in the Commission’s recommendation and the final negotiating directives.

| European Commission (2017) recommendation | EU negotiating directives (Council of the European Union, 2018) |
|---|--|
| <p style="text-align: center;">On gender</p> <p>The Agreement will promote rights-based policies, encompassing all human rights and ensuring equal access to opportunities for all members of society, regardless of ethnicity, gender, age, disability, religion, beliefs, sexual orientation and gender identity, migration status or other factors. (p. 6)</p> | <p style="text-align: center;">On gender</p> <p>The Agreement will promote rights-based policies, encompassing all human rights and ensuring equal access to opportunities for all members of society, regardless of ethnicity, gender, age, disability, religion, beliefs, sexual orientation and gender identity. (p. 6)</p> |
| <p style="text-align: center;">On migration</p> <p>(no specific text proposal)</p> | <p style="text-align: center;">On migration</p> <p>The Agreement will strengthen the commitment of the Parties to enhance cooperation, in a spirit of genuine partnership and shared responsibility and in full respect of international law, including international human rights law, EU and national competences. (p. 10)</p> |
| <p style="text-align: center;">On SRHR</p> <p>The Parties will promote the protection and fulfilment of women’s and girls’ rights and their empowerment, including on matters related to their sexual and reproductive health, and will cooperate to eliminate all forms of sexual and gender-based discrimination and violence. (p. 12)</p> | <p style="text-align: center;">On SRHR</p> <p>The Agreement will commit to the promotion, protection and fulfilment of the right of every individual to have full control over, and decide freely and responsibly on matters related to their sexuality and sexual and reproductive health, free from discrimination, coercion and violence. (p. 31)</p> |

After a political deal had been reached in December 2020, final details were discussed between the negotiating teams to produce a text that could be “initialled” by the chief negotiators before proceeding to be signed and ratified. In March 2021, in the margins of a Foreign Affairs Council meeting, the Hungarian foreign minister publicly expressed Hungary’s opposition to the concluded agreement, and spread a conspiracy theory, arguing that the purpose of the new agreement was to put “increasing migration pressure on the bloc’s member states” (“EU ‘aiming to increase migration pressure on Member States,’” 2021). The agreement was subsequently initialled on 15 April 2021, with “[EU Party]” bracketed in the text to signal the need for the EU to reach an agreement on the legal nature of the agreement. During the summer of 2021, further changes were made to the legal nature to reflect a mixed competence agreement, without changing the substance of the agreement’s provisions. The choice of legal nature necessitated parliamentary ratification of the agreement by the 27 member states and thus required consensus in the Council before the agreement could be signed and moved to the ratification stage. The Hungarian government used this opportunity to refuse to agree to the signing, and the agreement once again became stuck in the COREPER. This was accompanied by stronger language from the minister, who, at a migration conference in Hungary, referred to the agreement as “a new madness” and referred to it as the “EU version of the UN pact on migration” (“FM Szijjártó,” 2021). To avoid a “legal vacuum” in the relationship with the ACP states, the existing Cotonou Agreement was extended again.

As the partnership was of high salience for the Commission (the Directorate-General for International Partnerships in particular) but of low salience to many EU member states, Hungary’s position did not lead to

considerable discussion or pressure, but rather to a combination of limbo and radio silence as Hungary sought to engage in identity profiling on provisions related to migration. The relative ease with which the Cotonou Agreement could be further extended considerably weakened Hungary's veto possibilities. Overall, following several extensions, it emerged that Hungary was able to delay but not prevent the new agreement from being signed. The delays were nonetheless considered damaging to the EU's international reputation (ACP–EU Joint Parliamentary Assembly, 2023) and the realisation that Hungary's position would not allow it to extract any returns accentuated its obstructive nature. Hungary subsequently lifted its blockage in April 2023, resulting in an awkward situation whereby Hungary (as reported in its media) seemed to have received written guarantees from the Commission, which the Commission denied ("Hungary agrees to EU signing," 2023; "Magyarország csak bizonyos," 2023).

April 2023 was not yet the end of the process since the Polish government took over from Hungary the role of cross-policy blackmailer and blocker of the agreement in COREPER. The Polish government seemed to act very erratically as it did not initially make the reasons for its blocking transparent. Only later did it emerge that the upcoming general elections played an important role. More specifically, Poland tied its support to the Samoa Agreement to EU funds being used to buy up excess grain production in Poland, to be used to support food security in ACP states. The ACP states had not requested such Polish support and the Polish government did not appear to have consulted them on this (Chadwick, 2023).

This move by the Polish government increased the internal and external pressures on the EU to reach an internal agreement at a time when substantive negotiations on the agreement had already been concluded more than two years before. While earlier statements were less explicit, in June 2023 the co-presidents of the ACP–EU Joint Parliamentary Assembly deplored the continued blockage—naming both Hungary and Poland—and argued that their stance undermined "a partnership of over one hundred countries from four different continents, constituting a third of the UN Membership[,] an important platform for advancing multilateralism" (ACP–EU Joint Parliamentary Assembly, 2023).

Media reporting suggests that in early July, the Spanish EU Council Presidency successfully packaged the decision on the Samoa Agreement in COREPER with another decision on EU sanctions on Belarus, a topic of much higher importance to the Polish government (interview 3). Further social media debates indicate that after the signing of the agreement, Poland switched back to identity profiling and presented a written declaration in COREPER on 18 July to present its position on SRHR, while supporting the decision to sign the agreement.

3.2.2. Scope Conditions: Financial Return, Salience, and Normative Dissonance

The negotiations on the Samoa Agreement provide an example of PRRP-led governments engaging in both cross-policy blackmailing and identity profiling at different times. As with the European Consensus on Development, the Samoa Agreement is a high salience issue in the field of European development policy where, first and foremost, the EU institutions, but also some member states, had an interest in successfully concluding the negotiations. Failure to decide on the signing of the agreement would not only have meant a weakening of the Commission's Directorate-General for International Partnerships but would also have reputational costs for the EU as a whole. This informed the Polish government's stance of (unsuccessfully) pressing for material returns in 2023 (interview 1).

In addition, normative dissonance regarding the framing of migration and SRHR was perceived to be high by both Hungary and Poland. In contrast to the European Consensus on Development, the Samoa Agreement would be a legally binding document valid for a minimum of 20 years, which made both governments particularly wary of including positive language on both issues.

4. Discussion and Conclusions

This article investigated the extent to which the behaviour of PRRP-led governments in EU development policy reflects unpolitics. It conceptualised two strategies of unpolitics: cross-policy blackmailing and identity profiling. Our empirical analysis of the two cases shows that PRRP-led governments in Hungary and Poland applied these strategies and thereby obstructed established decision-making processes in development policy.

Concerning the first case, we find that the PiS and Fidesz governments engaged in identity profiling related to the framing of the norms on migration, gender, and SRHR in the New European Consensus on Development. While other member state governments also sought to shape the framing of the Consensus related to migration, the Fidesz and PiS governments stood out by openly threatening to veto the entire text if their preferences were not respected—a type of government behaviour never seen before in comparable development policy dossiers on which member states generally work towards consensus. The engagement of these two governments in identity profiling was driven by strong normative dissonance between the Commission's proposed text and the position of the PRRP-led governments—as well as by the high salience of the Consensus for the policy field as such.

In the second case, we find that the same governments adopted unpolitics behaviour throughout the different phases of negotiations of the Samoa Agreement. We observe that cross-policy blackmailing and identity profiling were used selectively and to some extent erratically by both governments during critical junctures of the negotiations. Vetoing an agreement when it reaches COREPER without using opportunities to engage during Council working group meetings or spreading conspiracy theories as to the “real” intentions of the Commission in proposing an agreement was behaviour rarely seen before in development policy, and was clearly different from established decision-making practices. The assumed high salience of the Samoa Agreement for the Commission, as well as the expected possibilities for extracting material returns, provided entry points for PRRP unpolitics strategies.

The findings illustrate that we can observe unpolitics even in apparently low-risk, low-gain policy domains such as EU development policy. Hence, this article contributes to a better understanding of the issues on which and the conditions under which PRRP-led governments apply obstructive behaviour in EU policymaking processes. Although we have distinguished two different strategies of unpolitics, the case of the Samoa Agreement also demonstrates that cross-policy blackmailing and identity profiling are not mutually exclusive and may reinforce or complement each other.

In our case studies, it was mostly the PiS and Fidesz governments that engaged in cross-policy blackmailing and identity profiling. This finding is in line with other studies, which showed that although other EU member state governments have featured PRRPs since the mid-2010s, the PiS and Fidesz governments set themselves apart by their broad oppositional stance towards the EU's development policy (Chmiel, 2018; Szent-Iványi & Kugiel, 2020). Future research may dig deeper into the question of why other PRRP-led governments did not

play an obstructive role in the negotiations on the Consensus and the Samoa Agreement and if, or whether, they engaged on other EU development policy issues. This would also involve zooming in on the domestic drivers of unpolitics behaviour, which might be an important avenue for future research.

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Conflict of Interests

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Data Availability

All data is publicly available and listed in the list of references.

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