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Article

High Risk/High Gain: Changing Unpolitics in Covid-19 Vaccine Procurement

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Abstract

Populist governments engage in unpolitics when the electoral incentives for doing so outweigh the distributive risks from policy failure. Studying the joint procurement of vaccines against Covid-19, I show that a group consiting of mostly populist governments led by Austria negotiated in bad faith, rejected compromise solutions, and obstructed joint problem-solving. They deployed these "unpolitical" tactics only once the legal framework for joint procurement was in place and the roll-out of the jointly ordered vaccines had begun. At this point, unpopulist governments no longer faced the distributive risk of having limited access to affordable vaccines. By contrast, the electoral incentives for hard-nosed bargaining in bad faith increased, as the distributive issue of vaccine allocation became more salient and as populist governments came under pressure to deflect responsibility for having ordered insufficient vaccine doses.

Keywords

Unpolitics; Vaccine-Acquisition; Covid-19, European Union, Populism; Policymaking; Procurement

1. Introduction

This contribution examines to what extent and why populist governments engaged in "unpolitics" (Taggart, 2018) in the European joint procurement of vaccines against Covid-19. In the context of the European Union (EU), unpolitics refers to a paradoxical "destructive approach" (Zaun & Ripoll Servent, 2023b) to policy-making by right-wing populist governments that risk bad policy outcomes to gain electoral support. Scholars have traced unpolitics in EU asylum policy, where right-wing populists claim issue ownership (Zaun & Ripoll Servent, 2023a), but does unpolitics also shape populist government behavior in other areas? If so, under what conditions? I try to answer these questions by considering the trade-off between distributive risks and electoral rewards. Unpolitics may improve populist governments' voter appeal, but subverting effective problem-solving can also hurt their distributive policy interests. The behavior of populist governments in the joint vaccine procurement suggests that they only engage in unpolitics when the electoral opportunities outweigh the distributive risks.

The case offers an empirical test for this conjecture, because the balance between risks and opportunities changed over time. In the first period under study, the member states discussed centralizing vaccine procurement at the EU level. In the second, they discussed supporting countries that suffered from local vaccine shortages. Overall, unpolitics did not result in the kind of gridlock observed by Zaun & Ripoll Servent (2023a) in EU asylum reform, yet from one period to the next it changed in expected ways. Although absent in the first period, unpolitics proliferated in the second, when several populist governments flouted informal norms of consensual good-faith negotiations and stuck to maximalist bargaining positions. Some also obstructed joint procurement decisions, but without success.

The growth of unpolitics matches the changing risk balance. Without joint procurement, all populist governments would have been severely disadvantaged in the resulting international scramble for vaccines. By contrast, the distributive risks from a failed aid package were much smaller, because at worst, each country would still have received its population-based share in future vaccine orders. The electoral relevance also increased from the first to the second phase, because several populist governments came under pressure to deflect responsibility for misguided procurement decisions.

By examining the conditions under which populist governments engage in unpolitics, this study contributes to the discussion about populism and the politicization of EU governance in general (Hooghe & Marks, 2009; Bressanelli et al., 2020). In particular, it adds to the emerging research on the behavior of populist governments in EU policymaking (Pirro & Taggart, 2018; Taggart, 2018; Zaun & Ripoll Servent, 2023a). The study moreover contributes empirical knowledge about recent developments in the fields of procurement and health policy in the wake of the Covid-19 crisis. Traditionally, these areas have seen little EU activity, but were pushed toward more integration by the global pandemic (Brooks et al., 2021; Deters & Zardo 2023). The following section reviews the concept of unpolitics, its observable manifestations, and hypothetical conditions. The next gives an account of the study's research design. In the two subsequent sections, I examine the congruence between unpolitics and its hypothesized conditions across a sequence of two issues related to the vaccine procurement. The conclusion compares both issues and situates my findings in the broader debate.

2. Populist Unpolitics and Its Preconditions

Although populism is "quintessentially mercurial" (Taggart, 2000, p. 2), many agree that its hallmark is a "thin-centered ideology" (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 19) that is not based on "universal key values" (Taggart, 2000, p. 5) but on a distinction between a "pure people" and a "corrupt elite" (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 6). Most right-wing populist parties are also Eurosceptic. Although the form that populist Euroscepticism takes varies from country to country, an essential and common trope of Eurosceptic populism locates the corrupt elite in the foreign "Brussels bureaucracy" in constrast to the native people who are imagined as a homogeneous collective of national citizens that resides deep in the "heartland" (Taggart 2000, p. 96; Taggart 2018, p. 83; see also Pirro & Taggart, 2018).

The rift between the elite and the people implies ambivalence toward representative politics, which populists perceive as "messy and corrupting" (Taggart, 2000, p. 3). Representative institutions, "such as political parties, big organizations, and bureaucracies, (…) are accused of distorting the 'truthful' links between populist leaders and 'the common people'" (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 11). Since populists can hardly eschew politics, they engage in what Taggart (2018) calls unpolitics. Unpolitics frames political competition in terms of religion, conspiracy and war, which are used to justify setting aside ordinary rules and conventions (Taggart, 2018). That is why "populism revels in its transgression of norms" (Taggart, 2018, p. 85). Elaborating on the discussion in the introduction to this special issue (Zaun & Ripoll Servent, 2023b), I consider three ways in which populist norm transgressions could manifest within EU policymaking.

First, I expect *populist governments to engage in hard-nosed bargaining from fixed, maximalist positions*. EU policy-making is guided by unwritten normative expectations that are credited with facilitating intergovernmental conflict resolution and the discovery of efficient bargains. Prominent among them is the "culture of consensus", which requires member states to be flexible in their positions and treat vetoes and negative votes as a last resort (Hayes-Renshaw & Wallace, 2006; Heisenberg, 2005). This logic of diffuse reciprocity is anathema to nativist populists, for whom it amounts to a betrayal of the will of the people (Zaun & Ripoll Servent, 2023b). Rather than settling for compromise, populists adopt an all-or-nothing attitude, because they can blame likely bargaining fiascoes on the EU.

Second, I expect *populist governments to adopt underhand bargaining tactics based on insincere positions*. This violates another informal rule of EU policy-making that asks members states to negotiate in good faith. The interactions in the Council of the EU and the European Council are often based on deliberation and arguments rather than on hard bargaining and threats. With decreasing prevalence, this applies from the technical up to the summit level (Lewis, 2016; Puetter, 2012; Warntjen, 2010). The informal norms of Council decision-making do not require member states to explain and justify every contested opinion, but at a minimum, governments expect each other to put forward consistent positions and remain accountable to them. Encapsulating the will of the people, populist governments, however, see no obligation to explain their positions to the Brussels elite. Moreover, while all governments must consider their domestic constituencies, populist governments are especially given to performative signaling without regard to the merit of their position. At the extreme, populists use disinformation to "flood the zone with shit" (Steve Bannon quoted in Rauch, 2021, p. 163), that is, undermine the basis of reasonable discourse.

Third, I expect *populist governments to deliberately obstruct joint problem solving, even if this means incurring material costs or foregoing material benefits*. Zaun & Ripoll Servent (2023a, p. 2) argue that unpolitics may amount to "active efforts of populist governments to maintain the EU in a state of permanent crisis". Under this "destructive approach to policy-making" (Zaun & Ripoll Servent, 2023b), populists aim to subvert solutions to common policy problems in the hope of scoring popularity. Eurosceptic populist governments hope to gain electorally from (the semblance of) a dysfunctional EU that allows them to posture as a bulwark against interference into national sovereignty. Because they discount policy-seeking in favor of vote-seeking, their strategic obstruction pays little regard to the damage it may impose even on their own country.

When deciding whether to engage in unpolitics, populist governments balance electoral opportunities and material risks. Overall, *I expect populist governments to engage in unpolitics if the electoral gains they hope to gain from engaging in unpolitics outweigh the associated distributive risks*. The opportunity for electoral gains are presumed to be high when the issue concerns national culture and identity or salient transfers of resources and competences (Zaun & Ripoll Servent, 2023b). Distributive benefits are mostly at stake in "compulsory negotiations" (Scharpf, 1997, pp. 126–127), where unilateral action cannot change the status quo, and cooperation is required to improve collective and individual outcomes. This may be due to institutional rules that prohibit or (asymmetric) interdependencies that constrain unilateral policy choices.

In their introductory contribution, Zaun & Ripoll Servent (2023b) hypothesize that the extent of unpolitics varies across policy areas along with their risk profiles. The pooling of financial resources and the delegation of authority for joint vaccine procurement was an easy target of Eurosceptic politicization, implying electoral opportunities. Yet joint procurement strongly mattered for economic and health policy outcomes, implying distributive risks. Given these conflicting incentives, the policy area has a moderate potential for unpolitics. More importantly however, the risk balance may also vary across sub-issues within single policy areas, as I show in the case study below. As the negotiations moved from the centralization of vaccine procurement to the vaccine roll-out, the distributive risks declines while electoral concerns became more salient.

3. Empirical Strategy

To answer the question how electoral and distributive risks affect populist unpolitics, I use an empirical case study on the joint procurement of anti-Covid vaccines in the EU. The time-frame covers two important events: The first is the setting-up of a legal-institutional framework that allowed EU member states (and some third countries) to jointly negotiate advance purchase contracts with pharmaceutical companies under the auspices of the European Commission. The second event is the start of the vaccine roll-out, when the first doses were distributed. Together, these events span a one-year period between April 2020 and April 2021. For empirical data, I rely on primary documents and secondary literature. The former includes EU Council protocols, official statements by the European Commission and documents published by domestic regulators. The latter are academic studies and journalistic accounts from reputable field experts who cover relevant developments at the domestic and European level.

My analysis focuses on the behavior of populist governments. During the period under study, eight member state governments included at least one populist party (Armingeon et al., 2023; Van Kessel et al., 2023). With the exception of Cinque Stelle in Italy, all were conservative or far-right. In Austria, the larger of two coalition parties was the conservative ÖVP, which since the "turquoise" transformation qualifies as "center-right populist" (Liebhart, 2022, p. 31). Bulgaria was governed by the conservative-populist GERB with the nationalist United Patriots as junior partner. Both ÖVP and GERB are exceptions from the rule of thumb that right-wing populists are also Eurosceptic. The Czech government was a coalition of ANO, which represents a "technocratic form of populism" (Petrović et al., 2023, p. 274) and the social-democratic ČSSD. Hungary was governed by the right-wing populist Fidesz and the fundamentalist KDNP. In Poland, a coalition of five populist, conservative, and Catholic-nationalist parties was at the helm, led by the right-wing populist PiS. Slovakia was governed by a four-party coalition that included two populist parties, including the leading OĽaNO. The latter is based on an anti-establishment and anti-corruption platform that has been described as conservative by some and as populist by others (Petrović et al., 2023, p. 275). Finally, the Slovenian government consisted of four parties led by the SDS. Although nominally social-democratic, its outlook is nationalist and right-wing populist.

My dependent variable is the extent of unpolitics, which I assess separately in the two periods by surveying the observable implications that were derived in the previous section. I am agnostic about whether the different manifestations are additive, that is to say, whether bad faith negotiation contributes as to much unpolitics as obstruction. Empirically, it turns out that this question is irrelevant, as all manifestations in fact occur together. The

independent variable is the balance between the risks and rewards that populists anticipate to incur when they engage in unpolitics. I assess this balance in both periods by discussing the plausible ideal points and default outcomes (distributive risks) and the likely electoral consequences (electoral opportunities) of unpolitics. Overall, risks and opportunities pointed in conflicting directions, but as the risks decreased and the opportunities increased toward the second period, the balance shifted in favor of unpolitics.

The case study applies a "congruence method" (George & Bennett, 2005, Chapter 9). It ascertains whether the extent of unpolitics observed in both periods matches the theoretical expectation formed on the basis of the observed risk balance. Corresponding to this approach, I selected the case of joint vaccine procurement for two reasons. First, the issue is sufficiently salient to make unpolitics theoretically possible, even if it should not manifest empirically (Mahoney & Goertz, 2004). There is no point in looking for unpolitics in obscure technical decisions, because as a performative strategy unpolitics needs an audience. Second, the case has sufficient variation across both independent and dependent variables to study not only whether there is congruence at one point in time but whether both co-vary in line with the theoretical expectation. In terms of cross-case analysis, both periods represent "diverse cases" (Gerring, 2007, pp. 97–98).

4. Centralizing Vaccine Procurement

4.1. High Distributive Risks, Moderate Electoral Opportunities

The joint vaccine procurement was a potential target of populist campaigning, because it pooled 2.9 billion Euros for upfront payments at the EU level and put the Commission in charge of leading the negotiations with pharmaceutical manufacturers (European Court of Auditors, 2022, p. 8). Vaccine procurement was therefore unrelated to identity issues, but it involved a salient transfer of resources and competences. At this point, however, the negotiations focused on the creation of joint gains by making the procurement more efficient than it would be on a unilateral basis. Likewise, vaccine procurement only became a salient topic in the second phase, when production shortfalls delayed the inoculation drive (Wheaton & Deutsch, 2021). Overall, the electoral potential of politicizing the centralization of vaccine procurement at the EU level was moderate.

All governments urgently needed vaccines to mitigate the pandemic and relax the unpopular safety measures that put their economies on hold and restricted fundamental rights (Engler et al., 2021, p. 1088). Unilateral options were most limited for the majority of member states without strong pharmaceutical infrastructure. In particular the populist-governed Central and Eastern European (CEE) states lacked "scientific capabilities (…) to pull off the task of developing a vaccine" (Naczyk & Ban, 2022, p. 574), while "researchers at the Institut Pasteur and Sanofi in France and CureVac in Germany had promising vaccine candidates under development" ("The European Union's Vaccine-Acquisition Strategy," 2021). The need for vaccines was best met by joining forces. Member states' combined purchasing power increased their leverage in the negotiations with the pharmaceutical industry, and pooled resources allowed them to finance a diverse vaccine portfolio (Baute & Ruijter, 2022; Deutsch, 2021). By obstructing joint procurement, the populist governments would have cut themselves off the supply. With their comparatively weak healthcare capacity and residualist welfare systems, the CEE states were most vulnerable (Saxonberg et al., 2018). As the pandemic progressed, Bulgaria, for example, suffered the highest per capita mortality of any country in the world (CVRC, 2023). All this meant high distributive risks from policy failure.

Early in the pandemic, member states had undercut each other's supply of ventilators and protective equipment (Genschel & Jachtenfuchs, 2021, pp. 355–356), so when France and Germany in April 2020 agreed on financing and procuring vaccines together, there was concern that the two largest states would gobble up the first available doses before anyone else. In June 2020, they invited Italy and the Netherlands to join what became the "Inclusive Vaccine Alliance" (IVA). Despite the Alliance's proclaimed inclusivity, this move barely allayed fears of a two-tier procurement system (Deters & Zardo, 2023, p. 1060; "The European Union's Vaccine-Acquisition Strategy," 2021). The first steps toward joint procurement thus laid bare how much all member states, including those governed by populists, depended on cooperation and solidarity.

4.2. No Unpolitics

Congruent with the member states' converging interests, the joint procurement framework was created without much delay. On 11 March 2020, the World Health Organization declared the Covid outbreak a global pandemic. Some three months later, on 17 June, the Commission presented a draft framework, which the member states adopted the next day (European Commission, 2020). Although the decision took a month longer than the launch of "Operation Warp Speed" in the US, and nearly four times longer than the UK needed to establish its Vaccine Taskforce (European Court of Auditors, 2022, p. 16), the pace was rapid compared to the usual duration of significant EU policy-making. And

significant it was. The new framework was the first to cover all member states, it included a budget of almost three billion Euros, and it was much more centralized than the existing 2014 Joint Procurement Agreement, which granted few powers to the Commission, did not prevent individual countries from pursuing side-deals, and had no budget attached to it (Deters & Zardo, 2023, p. 160; European Court of Auditors, 2022, p. 8).

Already in late April, the Commission began to investigate vaccine candidates, so as to immediately start negotiations if and once the European procurement framework was set up (European Court of Auditors, 2022, p. 17). Although the Commission was with hindsight criticized for prioritizing indemnification and costs over the speedy conclusion of advance purchase agreements (Wheaton & Deutsch, 2021), it signed the first contract (with AstraZeneca) one day before the United Kingdom, on 27 August 2020 (European Court of Auditors, 2022, p. 17). Serious delays emerged only months later, when AstraZeneca did not meet the delivery schedule. No populist government attempted to stall the move toward joint procurement. If anything, progress was delayed by the detour of setting up the short-lived IVA. Despite calls for a European approach, the German health minister defended the IVA until his Chancellor reined him in before the start of Germany's Council presidency (Deters & Zardo, 2023, p. 1060). In summary, neither the institutionalization of vaccine procurement at the EU level nor the negotiation of the first contracts were encumbered by populist unpolitics.

One issue that caused mild controversy among member states was the choice of vaccine developers and the allocation of advance purchase agreements. Because it was uncertain which potential vaccine would succeed and when, the Commission proposed to invest in a broad portfolio of candidates to mitigate the risk of betting on the wrong product. This meant concluding advance purchase agreements with as many reputable manufacturers as possible. The development of any given vaccine required a minimum volume to be feasible, so a diverse portfolio implied many orders. The Commission's original plan was to distribute the jointly procured vaccine doses in proportion to each member states' population, i.e. pro rata (Deters & Zardo, 2023, p. 1061).

Some member states resisted this approach, because they considered the expenses too high and feared being left with excess doses, as in the 2009 H1N1 pandemic (Deutsch, 2021). The group included the rich "frugal four" – Austria, Denmark, the Netherlands, and Sweden – and the poorer CEE countries Bulgaria, Croatia, Czechia, Estonia, Slovakia, and Slovenia (Horaczek & Tóth, 2021; Mussler, 2021). They moreover preferred the cheaper vector vaccine that AstraZeneca promised to supply on a non-profit basis over the more expensive mRNA vaccines BioNTech-Pfizer and Moderna were developing.[1] The member states therefore agreed on a flexibility clause that allowed them to buy fewer doses from the joint orders than their pro rata claim, leaving them free to pick and chose. The excess doses could then be taken up by others through a process nicknamed "bazaar" within the Vaccine Steering Board, in which all governments were represented. Contrary to unpolitics, this conflict between states with different risk dispositions was settled by pragmatic compromise on the expert level and without political confrontation (Deters & Zardo, 2023, p. 1061).

5. Vaccine Distribution

5.1. Smaller Distributive Risks, Larger Electoral Opportunities

With the legal framework in place, the EU launched the first round of vaccine orders. Until 4 December 2020, the Commission signed contracts over the delivery of 1965 million vaccine doses with six different manufacturers.[2] The scattered sources reveal that several countries used the flexibility clause and ordered smaller and more homogeneous portfolios than they could have. For example, Austria (Rechnungshof Österreich, 2023, p. 59) and Estonia (Sotsiaalministeerium, 2021, p. 28) bought roughly two thirds, Czechia (Коджаиванова, 2021b) and Croatia (Croatian Public Health Institute, 2021) about one third, and Bulgaria 45 percent of their respective share (Коджаиванова, 2021a). All of them failed to exhaust their allotment of mRNA vaccines in favor of the cheap vector vaccines.[3]

[1] Next to costing six, and respectively, nine times less (Deutsch & Gijs, 2020), the AstraZeneca jab was easier to store and promised to be very effective, while the innovative mRNA vaccines still had to prove their worth (Deutsch, 2021).

[2] In February, the EU concluded another two contracts with BioNTech-Pfizer and Moderna over 300 million additional doses each (European Court of Auditors, 2022, p. 9), but these were due only in the second quarter of 2021 or later (Коджаиванова, 2021a). Eventually, the EU relied mostly on BioNTech-Pfizer and Moderna, which supplied 2400 million and 460 million doses at the end of 2023. (European Court of Auditors, 2022, p. 32).

[3] Poland, Greece, Portugal and Belgium also bought fewer doses than their pro rata allocation (Deutsch, Furlong, et al., 2021).

In late February 2021, it became manifest that the à la carte orders were mistaken. BioNTech-Pfizer and Moderna rather than AstraZeneca were the first to get green light from the European Medicines Agency (EMA). Their vaccines also turned out more efficacious. AstraZeneca and Jannssen moreover announced severe delays, and would eventually deliver just a third of the agreed volumes before the third quarter (European Court of Auditors, 2022, p. 34). Countries that had relinquishedn mRNA vaccine doses now faced the worst shortages and depended the most on tardy vaccine makers. The uneven roll-out divided the governments that had followed a risky procurement strategy from those that had hedged their bets.

As later detailed, a group consisting of four populist governments (Austria, Bulgaria, Czechia, and Slovenia) and two conservative mainstream governments (Croatia and Latvia) responded to the shortage by demanding additional doses. This backdrop changed the distributive risks and the electoral opportunities. Although the distributive salience was higher now, the earlier risk of ending up alone in an uncoordinated bidding contest had become negligible under centralized procurement. From the perspective of the governments that lobbied for redistribution, the worst case scenario consisted in the vaccine top-up not coming to pass, but even then they could still rely on the joint procurement and exhaust their pro rata shares in the subsequent orders.

While the distributive risk was thus diminished, the electoral stakes increased. The negotiations on the legal framework used to highlight the production of joint gains, and the EU-wide procurement had been regarded as a positive-sum game. But now distributive issues with identifiable winners and losers moved into the spotlight. This encouraged an adversarial perspective under which populist governments could profess to defend national entitlements. Moreover, the governments that lobbied for redistribution had contributed to the domestic shortages by relinquishing claims from the first joint order. Their bad decisions imperiled electoral support, which encouraged them to deflect responsibility and to adopt an uncompromising attitude in the hopes of bringing home a victory.

5.2. Rampant Unpolitics

Congruent with the lower risk of distributive losses and the heightened chance of electoral gains, four populist together with two non-populist governments engaged in unpolitics during the battle over the vaccine allocation. They violated norms of good-faith cooperation and consensus seeking, and partly obstructed the joint procurement process. I address each issue in turn.

5.2.1 Bad Faith

By adopting underhand bargaining tactics based on insincere positions and false claims, several populist governments violated the norm of good-faith cooperation. In response to the vaccine shortages in their countries, the heads of six governments, among them four right-wing populists, launched a public campaign in which they alleged having been short-changed in the roll-out. The initiative was orchestrated by Austrian chancellor Sebastian Kurz, and it included Bulgaria, Croatia, Czechia, Latvia, and Slovenia. In a joint letter to the Presidents of the Commission and the European Council, the Vienna group claimed to have “discovered” only “in recent days” that “deliveries of vaccine doses (…) are not being implemented on an equal basis following the pro rata population key” (Kurz et al., 2021). They argued that this ran afoul of the “spirit of European solidarity” and deviated from what member states had agreed on. In a publicized meeting a few days later, the group demanded a “correction mechanism” (Hochmuth, 2021). Kurz alluded to conspiring elites, when he claimed in a special press conference that many of his peers in the European Council “could not believe their eyes and ears” (quoted in Kronbichler, 2021). This was mirrored in an oblique remark by Bulgarian Prime Minister Borisov: “They say a committee had someone who was making the most important decisions of the European Council” (quoted in Коджаиванова, 2021a). The overall narrative had the Vienna group help national governments in curbing a runaway Brussels vaccine bazaar.

All allegations were untrue. The Vienna group argued that the doses were to be allocated strictly pro rata, but in fact the Council, with the Vienna group at the forefront, had introduced a flexibility clause that allowed individual countries to deviate from the population-based distribution. Moreover, the populist governments implied that dubious side-deals and an unaccountable Brussels bureaucracy were behind the deviation, but in fact they had deliberately relinquished eligible doses. To be sure, the vaccination rates in four of the six countries trailed behind the EU average. Bulgaria in particular had made very liberal use of the flexibility clause, which, combined with high vaccine hesitancy (Spirova, 2022), resulted in the lowest vaccination rate in the EU at the time. Neither Austria nor Slovenia, however, in fact suffered disproportionately from vaccine shortages (ECDC, 2023).

Good-faith cooperation would moreover have required the six to first raise their grievances with their colleagues on the Steering Board or, if the issue could not be resolved at the technical level, with the responsible ministers. Instead, the Vienna group published open letters and staged press conferences before even entering into negotiations. The Steering Board had already organized pragmatic help in the past (Коджаиванова, 2021a), most recently by sending an advance

delivery of 100,000 BioNTech-Pfizer doses to a hot spot in an Austrian ski-resort with lenient infection protocols (Rechnungshof Österreich, 2023, p. 65). But instead of targeting the working level, the Vienna group deliberately shifted the policy venue, asking "to hold a discussion on this important matter among leaders" (Kurz et al., 2021). This behavior highlights the performative nature of unpolitical negotiations, in which signals to the domestic electorate are as important as substantive policy decisions.

In their response, the Commission and the member states rebuffed the false allegations. In a terse note, the Commission recalled that "it would be up to the Member states to find an agreement if they wished to return to the pro rata basis" it had suggested in the first place (European Commission, 2021). The Commission refrained from proposing any redistribution, but since the production shortfalls put it on the spot, it had already begun to discuss a tighter delivery schedule with BioNTech-Pfizer (Deters & Zardo, 2023, p. 1062). The resulting advance shipment of 10 million doses became the focal point of the negotiations, starting at an informal video summit on 25 March. During the meeting, several member states called out the Vienna group's disregard for good faith. Germany's Chancellor Merkel observed "it turns out that not everyone has made use of pro rata" (quoted in Herszenhorn, Barigazzi, et al., 2021). Less dryly, she also remarked that the vaccine contracts were "signed by member states and (…) not by some stupid bureaucrats" (quoted in Peel et al., 2021).

5.2.2 Hard Bargaining

The Vienna group's public campaign also violated the norm of consensus-seeking, first by strongly politicizing the issue and shifting it to a salient policy venue. Technical expert deliberations are crucial for compromise in the EU (Warntjen, 2010). The campaign not only excluded this pathway; by taking a very public stance on how vaccines ought to be distributed, the Vienna group also created a commitment that was hard to retreat from and thus tied its members' hands in the subsequent negotiations. This made it harder to compromise, as we know from the literature on two level games (Bailer & Schneider, 2006; Schelling, 1980, p. 24). At the March 25 summit, however, the heads of state and government ("heads") eventually delegated the issue to the permanent representatives (COREPER) (European Council, 2021, p. 1). It is unusual for COREPER to be tasked with resolving such clearly distributive conflicts, because its typical role is to prepare non-political positive-sum issues for formal approval by the heads or ministers (Hayes-Renshaw, 2017). By nevertheless passing the hot potato to the technical level, the heads arguably countered the Vienna group's venue shifting attempt in order to contain the politicization.

Second, Austria, Czechia, and Slovenia also subverted the consensus culture by engaging in hard-nosed bargaining from fixed, maximalist positions. During the first COREPER discussions, most ambassadors agreed to give between one and two million doses from the advance delivery to states in need of additional vaccines, including Bulgaria, Croatia, and Latvia. Only a minority, led by Poland, was against distributing any doses in excess of the pro rata key, but there was more disagreement whether Czechia, Slovakia, and Estonia should also qualify (Deutsch, Herszenhorn, et al., 2021). Consistent with the earlier position of the heads (Herszenhorn, Barigazzi, et al., 2021), a top-up for Austria, which had demanded 700,000 additional doses, found no support at all (Rechnungshof Österreich, 2023, p. 65). The compromise proposal by the Portuguese presidency made additional concessions. It enlarged the aid package to three million doses and included Czechia, Estonia, and Slovakia. Due to their relatively benign position in the roll-out, Austria and Slovenia were still excluded (Herszenhorn, Deutsch, et al., 2021). Not only Austria and Slovenia but also Czechia remained committed to rejecting the proposal, which meant giving up on 140,000 additional doses. Although the former two had a distributive reason for the rejection, it would have been consistent with their purported advocacy for member states affected by shortages to accept a compromise that gave them relief.

4.2.3 Obstruction

A populist hard core of the Vienna group also obstructed joint problem solving. The day after the summit, even before the COREPER ambassadors had a chance to discuss, the Austrian Steering Board delegate threatened to veto the larger order of 100 million doses from which the advance delivery was to be taken. This held the entire European inoculation drive hostage. Austria claimed to be supported by the remaining Vienna group (Deutsch, Herszenhorn, et al., 2021), but the coalition was crumbling. While the Czech Republic and Slovenia remained loyal, Bulgaria, Croatia, and Latvia no longer agreed with the increasingly hard-nosed bargaining that jeopardized the aid-package (Herszenhorn, Deutsch, et al., 2021). The fault line was thus between the countries included and excluded from the proposal. Bulgaria moreover suffered from the most severe shortage, while neither Croatia nor Latvia were governed by populists. The other member states perceived the veto threat as a stark norm violation. One diplomat criticized it for exacerbating the shortage in countries "in dire need (…), like Latvia and Bulgaria". Another deplored that "solidarity is a one way street to Vienna," and a third pondered the exclusion of Austria from joint procurement: "If Vienna doesn't want to participate (…) any longer, it will surely get its way" (all quoted in Deutsch, Herszenhorn, et al., 2021). Kurz had become, in the words of another official, a "persona non grata" (quoted in Herszenhorn, Deutsch, et al., 2021).

The member states eventually bypassed the vetoes by resorting to a voluntary aid package without contributions from the three antagonists (Herszenhorn, Barigazzi, et al., 2021). The advance delivery was thus allocated pro rata, but nineteen member states passed on 2.8 million doses – three million doses minus the missing contributions from the antagonists – to Bulgaria (1,100,000 doses), Croatia (680,000), Slovakia (600,000), Latvia (376,000), and Estonia (41,000). Austria, Czechia, and Slovenia did not donate or receive any extra doses (Khan, 2021). Neither the growing indignation nor the loss of allies stopped their obstruction. In a last-ditch effort, the remainder of the Vienna group attempted to block even the voluntary aid package "until Council lawyers made clear that EU countries could do as they wished with their allotment of vaccines" (Herszenhorn, Deutsch, et al., 2021). Austria and Slovenia had not been part of the Presidency compromise, but Czechia paid for its intransigence with 140,000 doses (Herszenhorn, Deutsch, et al., 2021). Perhaps the country anticipated (correctly) that Austria would reward its loyalty with a bilateral vaccine donation if the campaign failed (Horaczek & Tóth, 2021). Although the obstruction backfired, Kurz maintained that Austria had not only emerged as a winner but also helped unfairly disadvantaged countries (Rechnungshof Österreich, 2023, pp. 67–86).

4.2.4 The dogs that didn't bark

Unpolitics was widespread but not uniform across the seven governments in which right-wing populist participated during the study period. The Vienna group included only four of them. In particular, the two largest and long-standing populist governments of Poland and Hungary neither participated in the Vienna group nor engaged in unilateral unpolitics during the vaccine-related EU policymaking. Hungarian Prime Minister Orbán, however, supported the group's allegations in a public radio address (Horaczek & Tóth, 2021). Hungary also ordered the Chinese and Russian vaccines Sputnik and Sinopharm, despite their lacking approval by the European Medicines Agency (Moreno et al., 2021). Orbán claimed that Hungary was able to vaccinate many more people than any other EU country of similar size "because we don't rely solely on the EU's slow vaccine distribution", for which "slow Brussels bureaucrats" were to blame (cited in Hloušek & Havlík, 2024, 161). In fact, Hungary received more vaccines from Western manufacturers than from its Eastern suppliers, but its political communication strongly emphasised Hungary's independent decision to rely on China and Russia (Peragovics & Kállai, 2021). Asking for more Western vaccine doses would have contradicted this rhetoric. Brief, Hungary's political communication showed signs of populist unpolitics, but since its electoral and distributive incentives and therefore its particular risk balance were different from those of the Vienna group, the Hungarian unpolitics did not shape governmental behavior in vaccine-related EU policy-making.

The Polish position seems more idiosyncratic and at odds with the hypothesis that unpolitics is determined by the balance of electoral and material risks. Like many others, prime Minister Morawiecki criticized the slow pace of the joint procurement, but his criticism was framed "as an appeal for the EU to be strong and efficient" (Hloušek & Havlík, 2024, p. 162), It also lacked the fierce attack on the distributive fairness of the vaccine roll-out that was central in the Vienna group's campaign. This was despite the fact that Poland, like the Vienna group countries, had not procured all mRNA vaccine doses it was entitled to (Deutsch, Furlong, et al., 2021). But rather than joining the call for redistribution, it rejected the notion of an aid package. In contrast to unpolitics, Poland did not block the package but opted out while letting the other member states proceed (Deutsch, Herszenhorn, et al., 2021; Herszenhorn, Barigazzi, et al., 2021).

6. Conclusion

The centralization of anti-Covid vaccine procurement shows all the hallmarks of unpolitics, but with a lower intensity compared to the paradigmatic case of the Dublin IV asylum reform (see Zaun & Ripoll Servent, 2023a). Unpolitics occurred only in the roll-out, and it did not result in gridlock. This finding is congruent with the expectation that unpolitics varies according to the incentives in a given policy area. In the present case, electoral and distributive risks provided conflicting incentives. On the one hand, the joint procurement implied a salient delegation of competences and pooling of resources, opening a Eurosceptic attack vector. On the other hand, the human and economic costs of the pandemic made it risky to subvert cooperation and end up without affordable vaccine access.

As risks and opportunities changed between the first and the second phase of the joint procurement, so did the extent of unpolitics. Unpolitics was absent at first and emerged only during the roll-out. When the member states set up the institutional framework, populist and other governments faced the risk that the larger and more affluent countries would leave the others scrambling for scraps. This had happened, after all, with important medical equipment during the first weeks of the pandemic (Genschel & Jachtenfuchs, 2021, pp. 355–356), and for a long time it accurately described the global situation (Deters & Zardo, 2023). But once the first joint orders had been placed and the roll-out was about to begin, being left out in the rain was no longer a risk. In the ensuing redistributive battle, the Vienna group risked a one-time top-up but it could still rely on its pro rata shares. It had little to loose except good will. The possible electoral gains from unpolitics now increased too, as the governments that had passed on urgently needed vaccine doses came under pressure to deflect blame for this in hindsight mistaken decision.

The joint procurement example shows that unpolitics is not limited to individual issues like migration policy for which right-wing populists claim ownership. It moreover corroborates the hypothesis that differences across policy areas are related to specific risks and opportunities. At the same time, the risk profile may be situational and subject to change even within single policy areas and between countries. While unpolitics in the vaccine roll-out was extensive, it did not include all populist governments. Hungary and Poland, the largest countries governed by populist coalitions, did not join the Vienna group, although Hungary offered rhetorical support. Conversely, two of the six states in the Vienna group were not governed by populist parties, although only populist governments engaged in full obstruction. These complications highlight, on the one hand, that the risk balance for individual populist governments may differ according to local conditions. On the other, they show that populist unpolitics is but one of several potential factors that may explain why governments chose to transgress informal norms of EU policy-making. The different forms in which unpolitics can manifest provide yet another opportunity for further research. In vaccine procurement, bad faith negotiations, maximalist bargaining and obstruction all occurred together, once the risk-balance had shifted. This may not always be the case. Based on different empirical material, future research could develop a more fine-grained analysis of how populist governments chose between these strategies.

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