

The Council of the European Union plays a crucial role in the EU decision-making process and is composed of the member states representatives, from officials and diplomats to ministers. The topic of this project is the consensual character of the decision-making process in the Council – the fact that most issues are decided without any recorded opposition, even though it is often formally possible to decide by qualified majority, not unanimity. The prevalence of consensus in the Council is unexpected and surprisingly stable.

The weakness of previous approaches is that they were usually too detached from the practical reality of work in the Council. It is therefore necessary to apply new approaches in order to further advance our understanding of what takes place in the Council regarding consensus. The objective of the project is to learn how these officials make sense of their actions which ultimately result in a situation when none of them openly opposes a decision, and whether there is any tension between the responsibility to represent the government and the practice of consensus.

The approach proposed in this project is innovative because it directs its attention to the understanding of consensus by the people whose actions actually produce consensual decisions. The project is empirically focused and problem-driven, and embraces the so-called “practice turn”.

The project adopts interpretive methodology, which is usually associated with qualitative methods, especially field research meant to produce rich and in-depth empirical material. Interpretive social science puts meaning-making (how people understand and make sense of their lifeworld, including their own actions) at the centre of researchers’ interest. The main method of data generation in the project is in-depth interviewing, which will be conducted during field research (in Brussels and Warsaw).

The project will enrich the understanding of consensual decision-making in the Council. Its contributions include substantive contributions to the field, methodological and theoretical contributions to the discipline, as well as contributions relevant for the society. Consensus could either enhance or undermine legitimacy of power at the EU level, depending on what it means in everyday decision-making. This meaning could include the ideas of equality and cooperation, as well as perceptions of asymmetrical power relations and coercion.