MINILATERAL COOPERATION IN THE EU

Internal Cohesion, Group Dynamics,
and Voting Behaviour of Selected State Blocks

Tamás Levente Molnár (Ed.)

INSTITUTE FOR FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND TRADE
HUNGARY

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Publisher: Institute for Foreign Affairs and Trade

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ISBN 978-963-7039-69-0

Budapest, 2021

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ABBREVIATIONS

Antici – A high-ranking diplomat from the permanent representations in Brussels who assists the ambassadors in COREPER II in the preparation of compromises on EU legislation between Member States

CFSP – Common Foreign and Security Policy

CSDP – Common Security and Defence Policy

COREPER – Committee of Permanent Representatives

FAC – Foreign Affairs Council

GAC – General Affairs Council

HR – High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy

Mertens – A high-ranking diplomat from the permanent representations in Brussels who assists the COREPER in the preparation of compromises between Member States

P5+1 – The UN Security Council's five permanent members; China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, the United States; plus Germany

PSC – Political and Security Committee

OLP – Ordinary Legislative Procedure

FOREWORD

Márton Ugrósdy

Is minilateralism and old wine in new bottles? This report might suggest otherwise, as European Union Member States always had the tendency to work together on several policy issues if their interest coincided, despite any other political differences they might have over time. But as conventional wisdom has it, Brexit is the catalyst of most of the changes in the EU, therefore it is worth revisiting this question after the departure of the United Kingdom and the readjustment of the balance of power within the European Council and other formats.

This short volume aims to understand minilatarlisms with a mixed-method approach. Whereas the voting patterns of all Member States are analyzed based on all available data during the 'Ten Years of Crisis' period, the authors took pains to conduct interviews as well at the – so far – height of the pandemic to get to know the inside view; we are deeply grateful to the former and current diplomats who have volunteered to share their time and expertise with us to facilitate this research and thus we are delighted to present our findings to them too.

Some minilateral formats are well known and even notorious in the EU. Others sometimes emerge in the news, but we regard them as not so much institutionalized and maybe not so important fora which are aimed at shaping the policy discourse within the EU, and most importantly, to seek compromise on issues which are of mutual interest, but with a different shade of importance. Drawing on existing scholarship this study is indeed focusing on cooperation – ironically, however, the easiest way to identify cooperation is when these groups are exercising their veto rights to water down initiatives that are against their interests.

Based on the empirical results of this book, it is hard to claim that minilateralisms are game changers in the internal workings of the European Union, these are not the silver bullets that one might wish for to resolve longstanding gridlocks in EU policymaking. But it would be foolish to dismiss them as useless as well: the findings clearly show that within certain limitations, minilateralisms are playing a major role in coordinating national positions on many policy issues, and the formal and informal networks of

not only the highest leaders of the countries but those representing them in Brussels are vital to the smooth functioning of the European Council, as well as the General Affairs and Foreign Affairs Councils.

The most important role of minilateralisms might be that they are acting as force multipliers, especially for smaller Member States. If and when the unanimous voting requirements will change, minilateralisms will become even more important, and the Member States realizing this coming change have started to look for partners – and strange bedfellows as well. It might be possible that the geographical nature of most minilateral formats will be changed to an issue- or rather interest-based approach, where functional groupings like the Frugal Four will emerge even more frequently in the future.

Understanding how governments work together in the EU is one of the greatest challenges, but the solution is not to abolish the role of Member State governments in the long run. On the other hand, trying to understand the complex web of interests, personal relations and political sympathies of these countries might enable us to better understand the internal dynamics of EU decision-making, and this demystifies the EU a little bit.

Of course, nobody wants to know how politics or sausage is being made. This is our attempt to understand how the sausage is being made by 27 butchers and chefs, who have completely different tastes, too.

1. INTRODUCTION

Tamás Levente Molnár

The numerous regionally and functionally organised groups formed by the EU Member States over the last ten years have become increasingly important in the EU's policy formulation. These various groups promote integration within the EU by bringing new dynamics to European politics, while also contributing to the further fragmentation of the Union.

During the last two to three years, an increasing number of scientific articles concerning European minilateralisms have been published. Many of these articles not only examine the phenomenon of minilateralism, but also provide a good theoretical and methodological framework for further research. However, comprehensive research regarding the inner cohesion of minilateral groups, the level of their effectiveness, and their success to act collectively has not been conducted as of yet.

This project aims to examine and compare the functionality and effectiveness of six different minilateral groups which in part often, in part just sometimes operate collectively to influence the decision-making processes within the EU institutions.

The six groups in question are

- the Benelux,
- the E3,
- the Mediterranean Seven,
- the Nordic-Baltic Six,
- the Visegrad Group,
- the Weimar Triangle.

The intention behind this selection was to choose relatively heterogeneous groups which on one hand differ in terms of regional and functional focus, in size and number of their members, level of integration, and time of establishment, but on the other hand allow us to cover the vast majority of EU Member States. We assume that the current selection of six minilateral groups will provide us a solid base for comparison, enabling us to find evidence of the possible similarities and differences between the groups in terms of voting behaviour, policy preference formulation, inner cohesion, etc.

The research will focus on the inner cohesiveness of the six selected minilateral EU groups, based on the member countries' voting behaviours in the Council of the European Union. Particularly, shared blocking tactics, or the lack thereof, of the respective countries and groups as part of collective action will be investigated. The study will also explore micro dynamics among and possible alliances between two or more countries, both within their respective minilateral groups and beyond. Further, it focuses on the various policy areas (e.g. agriculture, economy, foreign policy, fisheries etc.) and examine how the Member States and/or minilateral groups' voting preferences look like as per policy area, eventually seeking to draw conclusions from the results.

The analysis will cover a period of ten years (2009-2019), divided into two parts, each of them consisting of one whole institutional cycle of the European Union: the first part lasting from 8 June 2009 to 25 May 2014, the second from 26 May 2014 to 27 May 2019. The covered period matches the timeframe of the so-called "Ten Years of Crisis", starting with the Great Recession (2008-2009), followed by the European sovereign debt crisis, and ending with the migration crisis. We intend to examine whether these internal and external developments had any effect on the overall voting behaviour of Member States, i.e. if it became more cooperative or confrontative.

The study will have the following research design: In the first part of the research, the applied quantitative and qualitative methodology will be explained, and an overview of the academic literature about minilateralism will be provided. The second part consists of the case studies about each of the six minilateral groups, which make up the most important part of the whole study. Each case study will consist of three parts: an introductory part – basic information, academic literature review, analysis of the level of integration –, a quantitative analysis – the analysis of the voting records (see quantitative methodology) –, and a qualitative analysis – the analysis of the expert interviews (see qualitative methodology). The third and therefore last part of the research will be the final report, which will summarise our main findings and draw conclusions from them.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Tamás Levente Molnár

Minilateralism as a noun consists of two parts, mini and lateral. Mini originates from Latin *minimus, -a, -um* ("least" or "smallest") and, according to the Cambridge Dictionary, as a prefix means a "smaller or less important than a normal example of the same thing". Lateral as an adjective is derived from the Latin noun *latus, lateralis* ("side" or "flank") and means "pertaining to the side". So just like multilateralism refers to many different "sides", interests or parties being involved in something, minilateralism refers to a smaller number of different parties being involved operating within a group as a subgroup.

The phenomenon of states forming groups and alliances to achieve specified goals is as old as statehood itself. The history goes back to ancient Greece, where military alliances such as the Athens-led Delian League or the Sparta-dominated Peloponnesian League were formed, both including hundreds of individual poleis. Other formations later in time had a different focus, such as the Hanseatic League during the Middle Ages, which was primarily a trade and commercial confederation. But there is an important reason these groups or alliances cannot be considered minilateral: although they consisted of many different elements, but they were not a smaller unit of a bigger one, and therefore were not minilateral.

Although it is certainly possible to pick specific examples from history before the 20th century which fulfil the definition's criteria, the boom of minilateralism is generally associated with the spread of multilateral and regional organisations after World War II. Chapter VIII of the UN Charter calls on the Security Council to encourage the development of regional arrangements for the peaceful settlement of local disputes. Thus, the simple reason behind the growth in number of minilateral groups is that they were able to function as sub-organisations within these multilateral and regional organisations. As we will see, minilateral formats' activities and, correspondingly, the academic literature about minilateralism grew towards the end of the 1990s and especially during 2000s. This was primarily caused by a general feeling of disillusion towards multilateral institutions' abilities to create global public goods, be it in questions of environmental preservation, health, nuclear non-proliferation, or trade. The frustration was further triggered by the

global financial crisis, from which public confidence in effective multilateral cooperation took a large hit. In these circumstances, there was an urgent need for a new form of cooperation among states, and minilateralism seemed to be the answer.

The scientific debate about minilateralism was greatly influenced by Moisés Naím, who published an article titled "Minilateralism" in the Foreign Policy magazine in 2009, thereby first publicly (or at least first traceably) introducing the term into academic literature. In his article, Naím claims that global multilateral cooperation was failing since the early 1990s due to several reasons such as financial commitments and promises not being honoured, deadlines being missed, etc. He lists some specific examples for failing or underperforming multilateral cooperation like the Kyoto Protocol, the UN Millennium Declaration, or the prevention of the proliferation of nuclear weapons. Therefore, instead of the "flawed obsession with multilateralism", he proposes a different concept for fostering global action: minilateralism.

"By minilateralism, I mean a smarter, more targeted approach: We should bring to the table the smallest possible number of countries needed to have the largest possible impact on solving a particular problem" (Naím 2009). In Naím's view, minilateralism means finding the "magic number" of countries able to break the "world's untenable gridlock" and reach agreements in a smaller, inclusive circle. These agreements should be open to be joined by other countries as well, assuming they are "willing to play by the rules agreed upon by the original group". Recognising that minilateralism is far from being a panacea – "minilateralism of magic numbers is not a magic solution" –, Naím believes that it is still better than the current "stalemate that characterizes 21st-century multilateralism".

Naím's essay triggered an international debate about the nature of multilateral action in the 21st century among regular commentators of FP.com, where he worked as editor-in-chief at the time his article was published. Stephen M. Walt gives a truly realist answer in his response when he argues that world politics was always heavily dependent on the actions of an exclusive circle of great powers. In order to make progress on global matters, "obtaining their assent is necessary *and in some cases sufficient* condition for meaningful progress" in global matters (Walt 2009). However, in Walt's view, minilateralism does not provide any answers when there is no accordance among great powers on significant issues: the US is not going to enter in any legally binding global climate deal if China and India are not on board. Daniel W. Drezner

agrees with many of Naím's statements, but he argues that minilateral and multilateral approaches are not an either/or question, as they often complement each other. Besides, he points out that multilateral structures are not going to go away simply because they are contested, mentioning that even if "China and Russia would like to rejigger global economic governance, they can't make the IMF disappear" (Drezner 2009).

Others, like Ian Bremmer, highlight the fact that it is still a great challenge to find consensus in a club of 20 countries instead of 200, given the fact that many of the emerging powers have views on issues with global relevance that fundamentally differ from those of the more established ones. In his view, countries such as the BRIC states are "far more concerned with domestic than with international challenges", thus the "forward movement on transnational issues" will rely on regional actors like the EU, the GCC or the ASEAN (Bremmer 2009). And finally, David Rothkopf's contribution points out that minilateralism, a new term for a "coalition of the willing", cannot be used for a disguised unilateralism, as happened in the case of the 2003 invasion of Iraq. Bush's minilateral approach was merely a "fig leaf for unilateralism" and described a small group of countries helping to "advance U.S. policy to create the illusion of something truly multilateral and thus ok in the eyes of the international community" (Rothkopf 2009).

Naím's article and the resulting debate were existential for the development of academic literature on minilateralism. Broadly speaking, the contributions were mostly focusing on how to improve multilateral cooperation and make global governance more practical. In this pursuit, the articles were generally concerned with the possible practical gains and feasibility of minilateralism, and less with the inherent normative (what happens to those who are left out?) and legal (does it violate international law?) issues that come with it (Borgen 2009).

Despite minilateralism's "kick-off debate" in the column section of FP.com, the academic literature on what the term broadly describes reaches back to earlier years, although various scientific contributions were not using the buzzword minilateralism yet. The term most commonly used in the literature from the 1990s onwards was subregionalism, referring to the multilateral cross-border cooperation platforms in the forms of subregional groups especially in Europe after 1989. There is extensive academic literature on subregional groups that deals with different facets

of the phenomenon such as regional typology (Cottey 2000), security aspects (Bailes 1999), or their relations to specified EU policies like macro-regional strategies (Dangerfield 2016).

While subregional groups – like the Benelux Union, or the Nordic Council – already existed in Europe since the 1950s, the proliferation of these groups was accelerated by the numerous political changes the continent underwent from the 1990s onwards, especially in Central Eastern Europe and the Mediterranean region. While in the former, these groups provided a framework for addressing political and economic challenges in the post-Cold War transitional period by pooling and sharing expertise and resources and also proved to be a useful format by the eastward enlargement of NATO and EU, in the latter the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership or Barcelona Process was mainly dedicated to solving issues concerning illegal immigration, the rise of 'political Islam', terrorism, environmental degradation and economic underdevelopment (Cottey 2000). Based on Cottey's classification, sub-regional groups have four different roles: a bridge-building function across dividing lines between members and non-members of groups or organisations, especially in regard to NATO and the EU; an integrative function to help states to join regional or multinational organisations; a framework for addressing transnational policy challenges; and a role as facilitators of political, economic and institutional reform (Cottey 2000). One of the most striking pieces of evidence in the continuity of the conceptual evolution from sub-regional groups to minilateral groups is the fact that many of the functions associated with sub-regional groups here can be found again in the academic literature about minilateral groups.

Back to the debate about minilateralism, a year after Naím's contribution, Richard N. Haass published an article in Financial Times titled "The case for messy multilateralism". Without mentioning the term "minilateralism" a single time in his article, Haass manages to describe the core feature of the concept. His starting position is similar to Naím's, as he claims that classic multilateralism became too difficult to achieve, and is often paired with ineffectiveness: "there are simply too many participants, too many contentious issues and too many domestic political concerns to discuss" (Haass 2010). He therefore comes to the conclusion – and herein agrees with Naím – that broad multilateral formats have a tendency to be ineffective, just like the UN General Assembly's "one man, one vote" system, which in his view is a "prescription for doing nothing". When it comes to fostering multilateral action, he agrees that minilateral formats can bring progress to these

matters, and introduces a classification of four categories of minilateral groupings. The first, "elite multilateralism", refers to bodies such as the UN Security Council, the G7, or the G20, which should "tackle the world's most important issues". The second, "regional multilateralism", concerns bilateral and regional trade pacts, particularly in Asia, which appeared mostly following the failures of the WTO. The third, "functional multilateralism", describes the "coalition of the willing and relevant". And finally, the fourth, "informal multilateralism", refers to the practise of national governments circumventing national parliaments to negotiate international accords, a "series of measures consistent with agreed-upon international norms", mainly in the financial sphere. Haass concludes his article similar to Naím by stating that none of what he describes in his four categories will be a cure-all, but rather could act as a complementary tool to classic multilateralism, as multilateralism in the 21st century will be characterised by being more "fluid" and "messy" than it used to be in the previous century.

In the same year, Stephen M. Walt criticized Haass's assessment and especially his statements about "informal minilateralism". "I can see the appeal of that idea (...) but despite my concerns about excessive congressional oversight (read: gridlock), I'm at least as worried by the damage that unconstrained executives can do" (Walt 2010). As we will see in later contributions, in particular those by Lang and von Ondarza, minilateral groups' tendency of executives negotiating informal or tacit measures that do not need to be ratified by legislatures is often listed as one of the main drawbacks of minilateralism which risks undermining democratic accountability.

The number of scientific articles focusing on minilateralism noticeably started growing around the mid-2010s. The vast majority of these contributions were mainly focusing on two areas: global economic governance (Brummer 2014, Brandi, Berger and Bruhn 2015), and global climate politics (McGee 2011, Eckersley 2012). The recurring reasoning by the different authors is that behind the increased interest for minilateralism stands the failure of multilateral, established and institutional structures to produce legally binding and effective treaties, which promotes the spread of selective state-based forums to circumvent these structures. As particular examples the Doha Round can be mentioned for international trade, while for global climate politics, the Kyoto Protocol, the Copenhagen, the Cancún, and the Durban conferences are certainly important. Beyond the many contributions concentrating on particular policy areas, Erica Moret's work "Effective minilateralism for the EU" is worth mentioning as it attempts to give an overview about

previous publications of minilateralism, but more importantly, it also aims to define the "recipes of success", the criteria needed for ad-hoc minilateral arrangements to function effectively. Despite its title however, the article focuses less on the European dimension, but more on a broader and global framework.

In Moret's definition, "minilateralism describes the diplomatic process of a small group of interested parties working together to supplement or complement the activities of international organisations in tackling subjects deemed too complicated to be addressed appropriately at the multilateral level" (Moret 2016, 2). Regarding the optimal working conditions for minilateral groups, first up is the decision about the acknowledgment of the group's existence, meaning an "improved dialogue within international institutions on whether, and under which conditions, minilateral initiatives should be permitted, or be better supported" (Moret 2016, 3). Moret argues that there should be a consensus within the international organisation about the minilateral subgroup not posing a threat to the original group but on the contrary serving a positive complementary purpose to the whole group. The second is about the size, or about finding the "magic number" of participating countries, meaning the creation of an exclusive club with the smallest possible number of participants having the largest possible impact, as was already explained by Naím. The third recipe is about the communication and coordination between and within international institutions for the sake of minimising misunderstandings in order to achieve successful outcomes. This presumes that the organisation gives its blessing to the minilateral group, as it hopes for better policy outcomes. This leads to the fourth point: It is claimed that "minilateral initiatives appear more likely to succeed if their efforts are facilitated and supported by the multilateral institutions under which they are housed" (ibid.). In the European context, this was observable in the case of the E3 during the JCPOA negotiations, or the Weimar Triangle during the Ukrainian crisis – both formats provided added value for the EU as a whole. The fifth is about the clarity of purpose: participants in minilateral formats have to "ensure that they share a joint vision, work to clearly defined objectives, forge agreement on how to share benefits more widely and be able to demonstrate where value is added to the wider group" (Moret 2016, 4). And finally the sixth point is about the nature of the alliance, assuming that coalitions sharing a common identity and belief tend to last longer than purely issue-based alliances.

The various scientific contributions mentioned so far were mostly focusing on either the theoretical framing of minilateralism or the minilateral groups' activities concerning global policy issues. One of the significant works concentrating on the European dimension of minilateralism, and therefore having particular relevance for our research was written by Kai-Olaf Lang and Nicolai von Ondarza. Their paper *"Minilateralismen in der EU - Chancen und Risiken der innereuropäischen Diplomatie"* (Minilateralisms in the EU – chances and risks of internal European diplomacy) not only provides a detailed theoretical framework about minilateral groups in general as well as in the European context, but also gives an extensive overview about their impact on European integration.

The authors define minilateralism in the EU context as a "coalition of three or more EU countries that either exchange views on European policy issues at governmental level with a certain degree of stability and agree on common positions or implement cooperation projects" (Lang and von Ondarza 2018, 2). The heterogeneous European minilateralisms can be sorted into two categories: geographical and functional groups. Examples for the first are the Benelux, the Visegrad Group, or the MED7, while for the latter, formations like the eurozone (or the non-eurozone), the E3, or the G6 can be mentioned. While geographical groups may show functional features (both the Visegrad countries and the vast majority of the MED7 states are active members of the "Friends of Cohesion" group, while the Benelux countries are traditionally counted as a determined promoter of human rights and rule of law issues in the EU), it is rather atypical that functional groups strive for any geographical coherence.

Several factors fostered the development of minilateral groups in the EU. One of them is the aftermath of the Union's enlargement, especially after the "big bang" of 2004. As the number of EU Member States increased significantly, it became more laborious and time-consuming to run the different working groups and reach a consensus in the EU Council. Because of this, minilateral groups offered a useful tool for Member States to channel their particular interests into the EU institutions, and enabled the preparation of decisions of EU-wide relevance. Thus, the increased number of minilateral groups is connected to the increased number of EU Member States, while the number of EU institutions remained stable. In this constellation, the minilateral groups serve as a sort of preparational body for Member States in EU matters.

Another factor is the renationalisation and strengthening of executive power as a result of the multiple crises of the EU, especially concerning the common currency, migration, and COVID-19. In all these crises, the importance of the EU Council has been greatly increased within the EU's inter-institutional power struggle. Keeping in mind the Member States' regular consultations of in changing constellations before EU Council sessions, the "meetings before the meeting", it is fair to say that minilateral groups present a valuable instrument for them to increase their bargaining power in the EU Council. This is especially the case for unanimous votes.

A third element, relating somewhat to the previous point, is that minilateral groups can also be used to build counterweight in the EU's or the eurozone's power structures. This could be observed in the case of the MED7 against the austerity measures of the eurozone (and some fiscally more conservative Member States) during the European debt crisis, or the Visegrad Group's restrictive refugee policy opposing the more open approach supported by the European Commission (and especially Germany).

Brexit will expedite the block-building nature of EU politics, as the many Member States, particularly the Northern and Eastern Europeans, lost their most valuable and influential partner in many policy areas. After the UK left the EU, the traditional European power triangle of France, Germany, and the UK did not exist anymore, leaving the EU with an overwhelmingly powerful France and Germany. This development triggers small and medium-sized Member States to form coalitions and build blocks against the Franco-German tandem. We already experienced a preview of the post-UK European power struggle when the Frugal Four, an association of fiscally conservative states, managed to hinder the original French-German proposal for the grant-loan ratio of the NGEU recovery fund at the European Council meeting in July 2020.

The cooperation of Member States has significant effects on the functioning of the EU. Lang and von Ondarza provide a thorough list of both the advantages and the disadvantages of minilateral cooperation from the EU's perspective. Among the advantages is the early detection of different Member States' positions in various minilateral fora, which makes it easier to forge compromises on a bigger scale in the European decision-making. Also, minilateral groups are a useful tool for power multiplication especially for smaller and medium-sized Member States, as they can increase their political weight by convincing other group members of their positions. In terms of domestic politics, according to the authors, this can help strengthen

the legitimacy of the group members' European policy. Further, minilateral groups can provide added value for the whole EU due to their specialisation and setting of priorities in different policy issues, such as in transport, infrastructure, energy, or neighbourhood policies. And lastly, minilateral groups have a bridging function, meaning they can provide an informal channel or offer the option for communication between the group members and other European Member States, minilateral groups, or even third countries. On a functional level, minilateral groups can also function as bridges among the group members, should one or more members be part of a certain forum while others are not.[1]

The minilateral grouping formation in the EU however also brings some downsides for the integration. As Lang and von Ondarza put it, it can incite fear of marginalisation in non-participants or even cause their exclusion. Further, the group dynamics of minilateral formats can easily lead to a certain state in which political decisions are made outside of the official institutions and procedures. At the same time, the informalisation of politics means that political processes become more difficult to understand, as responsibilities and competencies get blurred. An increase in minilateral formations inevitably leads to a weakening of parliamentary procedures, as the intergovernmental nature of decision-making often circumvents the Member States' national parliaments.

In our research, we will mainly build on the concept of Lang and von Ondarza, and thereby define minilateral groups as groups of three or more EU Member States, who are either regionally or functionally organized, and seek to influence the EU's policy formulation. These various groupings are promoting integration within the EU by bringing new dynamics to European politics, on the other hand contributing to the further fragmentation of the Union. As a part of the qualitative analysis, we will compare the theses of Lang and von Ondarza about the definition, function, advantages and disadvantages etc. of minilateralism and minilateral groups with our findings from the interviews to these issues, and consequently drew conclusions from it.

To conclude this chapter, it can be stated that the academic literature about minilateralism has been steadily growing over the past 10-12 years and is expected to grow yet further in the years to come. The reason behind the enhanced interest for minilateralism – both in politics and in the academic

1 This statement is particularly accurate for the Visegrad Group in terms of the participating countries' membership in the eurozone, where Slovakia is a member, but the other three countries are not.

world – mainly has to do with a global disappointment in the way multilateral organisations function as well as their capability to create effective policy outcomes for issues of global relevance. Minilateralism could effectively complement the work of multilateral organisations as it does not require everyone to "be on board", but is rather focused on bringing together the "smallest possible number of countries needed to have the largest possible impact on solving a particular problem", as Moisés Naím puts it. At the same time, minilateral groups raise important normative and legal issues, as they have the tendency to be intransparent and often lack democratic accountability. On the European level, minilateral groups seeking to influence the EU's policy formulation can be organised either regionally or functionally. These groups are promoting integration within the EU by bringing new dynamics to European politics, while on the other hand they also contribute to the further fragmentation of the Union.

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3. METHODOLOGY

Levente Kocsis and Matúš Mišík

QUANTITATIVE METHODOLOGY

Dataset

The dataset on EU Member State representatives' votes in the Council of the EU was retrieved from the Council's Open Data portal (European Council 2020a). It was first released in April 2015 as part of the Council's Open Data Initiative (CODI) to release the results of the Council's voting sessions on legislative acts to the general public. In addition to information on votes cast in the Council, the dataset contains other points of interest, such as the policy area of each of the acts voted on, the date of each vote, and more. It contains data beginning from December 2010 and is updated daily since then. As the analysis covers the 7th and 8th institutional cycles of the European Parliament, as mentioned above, this means that several months of data from 2009 and 2010 are missing from the Council's Open Data portal for our analysis, hence the necessity to complete the database with the use of other, yet official, sources. Prior to December 2010, information on votes was gathered through monthly summaries of the Council's acts, which are also available on the Council's website (European Council 2020b).

The dataset distinguishes between five types of votes: *in favour*, *against*, *abstention*, *non-vote*, and *missing,* while the difference between the latter two is purely technical.

As 94.58% of the votes cast during the first period and 96.47% during the second were *in favour*-votes, the analysis of the data might yield somewhat weak evidence of cooperation between Member States. The low share of unfavourable votes suggests that most controversial acts fail before even being voted on; hence additional investigation is required to draw a convincing conclusion, namely the conduction of interviews with high-ranking Member State officials. However, the methodology for the quantitative parts of this study will be discussed in the next section in detail.

Methodology

The quantitative parts of the case studies rely on the thorough analysis of the dataset described in the previous section. The analysed quantities can be sorted into two primary categories: First, the co-voting relationships among the Member States are investigated; then, the blocking attempts of the respective minilateral formations are examined.

During the study of co-voting behaviour two primary indicators are investigated:

- Vote similarity (in percent)
- Frequency of synchronous opposing votes (number)
- The above two by policy area

These quantities are self-explanatory, though some specifics should be pointed out. The vote similarity measure distinguishes four different types of votes (in favour, against, abstained, did not vote), while the synchronous oppositions metric differentiates between only two – support (in favour) and opposition (against, or abstentions during qualified majority votes). Non-votes are therefore not accounted for in the latter.

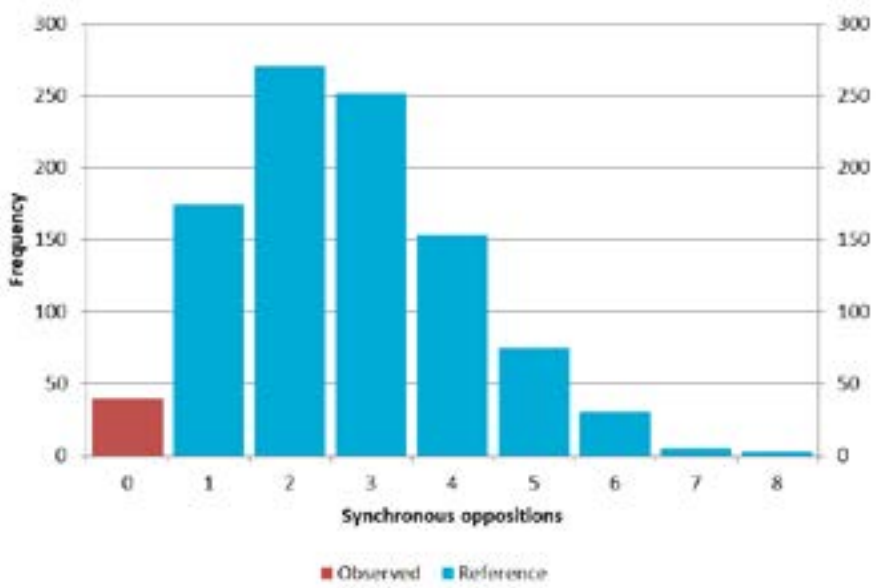
The relevance of the above measures might be challenged by saying either similarity or synchronous opposition could be the result of random contingencies rather than coordination. To dismantle this argument, the resulting values are compared to the null hypothesis of them being random coincidences. In practice, this is done by employing a type of resampling method, a permutation test tailored to suit the variables under investigation. For detailed information on permutation tests in general we refer the reader to Good (2004).

This test is done by the following process:

1. *The factual values of the relevant quantity are calculated.*
2. *The dataset is reshuffled, so that its characteristics –vote distributions of actors, and distributions of votes cast on each act - are preserved.*
3. *The quantities are calculated on this randomised dataset.*
4. *Steps 2 and 3 are repeated 1000 times.*

The above procedure, in addition to the observed factual values, yields a reference distribution corresponding to the null hypothesis of random contingencies (see Figure 1).

Figure 1
The distribution of synchronous oppositions of Germany and the UK under the null hypothesis of randomness (Reference) and its observed value (Observed) during the first period of the sample.

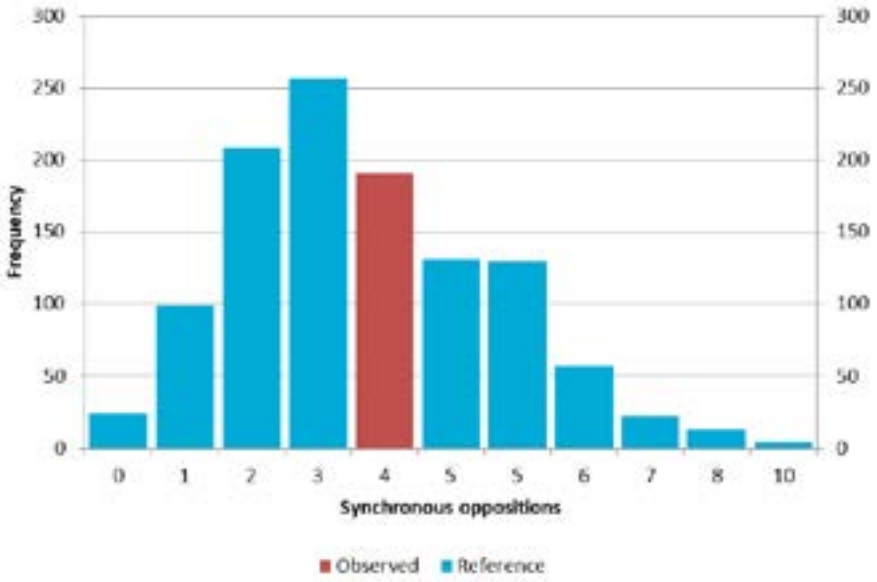


The general thought behind this process is that if, for example, 90% of the values calculated on the randomised datasets are higher/lower than the observed value, we can say with 90% certainty that the observed value is lower/higher than under the null hypothesis of random contingencies. Let α denote the desired significance level (90% in the above example), and N denote the number of repetitions (1000 in our case) during the process. If α•N of the randomized values is higher/lower than the observed, we say the observed value is statistically significant – on the α level – and higher/lower than under the null hypothesis. In our research, we use the customary values of α: 0.01, 0.05, and 0.1 that correspond to 99%, 95% and 90% certainty on the rejection of the null hypothesis of randomness.

In the above case of Germany and the UK, we can say that in 96% of the random cases their synchronous oppositions were higher than the observed, so the synchronous oppositions of Germany and the UK are lower than expected, and this observation is statistically significant on the 5% level. In other words, we can reject the null hypothesis of coincidence with 96% certainty.

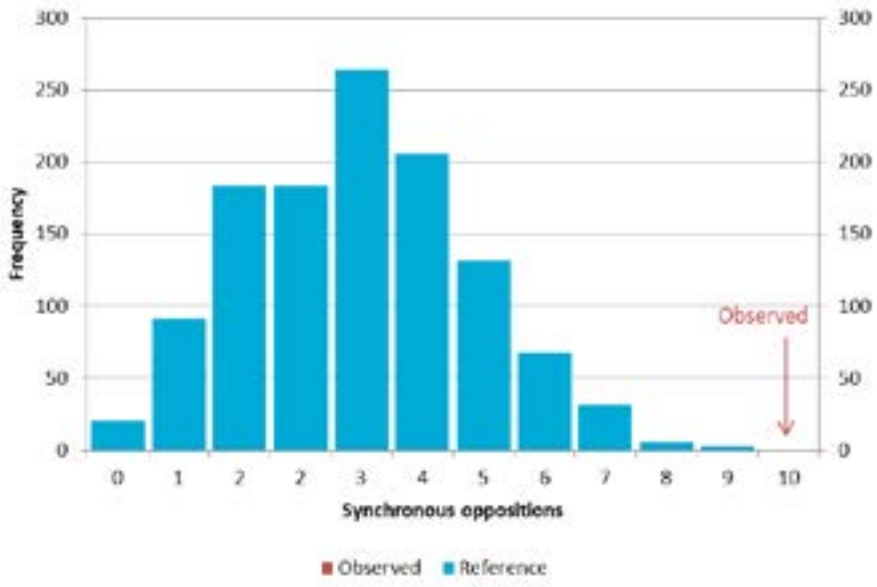
In a similar way, Figure 2 suggests that the number of four synchronous oppositions between Austria and the UK is not significantly higher or lower than it would be under the null hypothesis of randomness. Thus, we cannot reject it with any significant certainty.

Figure 2
The distribution of synchronous oppositions of Austria
and the UK under the null hypothesis of randomness (Reference)
and its observed value (Observed) during the first period of the sample.



Likewise, the example of the Netherlands and the UK in Figure 3 .illustrates a case where we can conclude that the number of synchronous oppositions is significantly higher than expected under the null hypothesis of random contingencies. In the 1000 random cases, there was not a single case when the number of synchronous oppositions equalled or exceeded the observed value of 10.

Figure 3
The distribution of synchronous oppositions of the Netherlands and the UK under the null hypothesis of randomness (Reference) and its observed value (Observed) during the first period of the sample.



These calculations are repeated for every policy area, though they should be treated with caution. As the number of votes in certain policy areas is small, the frequency of non-favourable votes is even lower, so there is little variation in the outcome of the randomisations – most outcomes correspond to the observed. This results in very few co-voting relations being found to be statistically significant.

The second component of our quantitative analysis relies on the blocking attempts made by the Member States in the respective minilateral groups. Specifically, we identified the cases where several members of the groups opposed an act at the same time, i.e. we identified blocs of 2, 3, etc. group members that supposedly attempted to block the legislative act in question. After identifying them, the frequency of these blocking attempts is calculated along with several other auxiliary quantities such as the average number of opposition in the group.

QUALITATIVE METHODOLOGY

In order to gain a deeper understanding of the quantitative data collected in the first part of the research, as well as to learn more about the role of minilateral groups within the decision-making process of the EU, we have conducted a series of semi-structured interviews with representatives of the EU Member States in question. We have contacted the respective permanent representatives as we assumed them to have the best overall knowledge of the decision-making process, considering they take part in the COREPER (Committee of the Permanent Representatives of the Governments of the Member States to the European Union) negotiations. This is the first level within the Council of the EU structure at which political decisions are taken. The COREPER is able to deal with unresolved issues from a political perspective, as the permanent representatives (and their deputies) have been delegated powers by their national governments and thus do not present technical expertise (as the working group level), but political competence. Therefore, the permanent representatives (and their deputies) within COREPER can conclude deals and forge compromises. Formally, the agreements and compromises achieved at COREPER level have to be approved by the ministerial (highest) level of the Council of the EU; however, achieved agreements are challenged very seldomly.

From the perspective of our research, aiming for the COREPER level has three main advantages: First, the COREPER (I and II) deals with all issues that are being negotiated within the Council of the EU. This enables us to gain access to an overall picture of how minilateral groups are created and utilised within the decision-making process of the EU. We expected different policy areas to each evoke specific forms of collaboration among the Member States; however, the COREPER covers all the policy areas, so we did not expect particularities of individual policies to skew our interview data in any significant way. Second, the COREPER level is a level on which a lot of compromises are forged. This due to its political nature (and delegation of competencies) on one hand and the frequency of it meeting (which is much higher than on ministerial level) on the other. Third, the ministers, while they have the last say in all Council's decisions, as opposed to the permanent representatives and their deputies are also concerned with domestic politics. Therefore, they could not be expected to be available for interviews due to their overall high workload.

We had originally aimed for face-to-face interviews, however, due to the Covid-19 pandemic and the serious limitations it caused for international travel we decided to switch to online interviews. This, however, presented whole new type of challenge, as personal contact is an important part of the interviewing process. Nevertheless, we still managed to gain interesting insights and important data for our research. We experienced different levels of cooperation from the permanent representations, but finally, we managed to conduct interviews with diplomats from every minilateral group represented in the study. The interviewees were selected to represent a broad scale of diplomatic ranks, from spokespersons, deputy-Antici, Antici, political & security committee representatives etc. up to the ambassadorial level.

We targeted incumbent diplomats currently posted to Member States' permanent representations in Brussels; however, due to the duration of our research (2009-2019), we also reached out to former officials from the permanent representations that could provide us with information from the earlier part of the examined period. We provided our respondents with a questionnaire (see annex) alongside with a general overview of the project beforehand. We managed to conduct 17 online interviews with representatives of 16 countries between December 2020 and July 2021. The interviews have been transcribed and analysed using MAXQDA qualitative data analysis software. The list of the interviewees can be found in the annex as well.

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4.1 BENELUX

Juraj Sýkora

ABSTRACT

The Benelux Union is a formalised but flexible minilateral group consisting of Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg. The group focuses on various policy areas, especially those in which the countries are like-minded and can find a common position, thus being able to unite and strengthen their voices in the Council. Interests and positions shared among Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg led to the creation of a customs union that lasted for more than 75 years before eventually evolving into the Benelux Union in 2008. The Benelux countries show high flexibility concerning voting results in the Council within the examined period of 2009-2019, as well as different preferences in choosing partners to cooperate with. Parallel to the achieved voting data, the conducted interviews show that the Benelux countries are trying to find common grounds and cooperate if they are like-minded on a certain topic, but if they do not share common interests, they can independently find partners in other groups or coordinate with other countries.

Basic information

- Participating countries: Belgium, the Netherlands, Luxembourg
- Combined GDP in total (in billion EUR, 2019): 1,511.41
- Combined GDP's relative share to EU28 total GDP (in %): 9.67
- Combined population in total (in million, 2019): 29.45
- Combined population's relative share to EU28 total (in %): 5.73
- Combined Council voting weights in the EU (old voting system, before 01/11/2014, in %): 8.10
- Combined Council voting weights in the EU (new voting system, after 01/11/2014, [reflecting the voting weight in 2014], in %): 5.46

Sources: Eurostat (2021a), Eurostat (2021b), Poptcheva and Devaney (2014)

INTRODUCTION

The Benelux was established as a customs union between Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg during World War II, on the 5th of September 1944 in London by the three countries' governments in exile. A customs union agreement was implemented in 1948. This laid the foundations for cooperation between the countries and opened the free trade area with a common tariff system towards third countries as well (Antoine 2021).

The importance and operation effectiveness of Benelux was neither decreased by the establishment of the European Coal and Steel Community, nor by the development of the European Economic Community. On the contrary, Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg established the Benelux Economic Union in 1958, which again deepened the economic cooperation and integration of the internal market (Verhaegen 2019). The goal of the treaty was to assure free movement of people, capital, goods and services, to coordinate financial, social and economic policies and to have a common trade policy towards third countries.

Since the treaty was set to expire in 2008, the Benelux countries updated the original treaty and the *Benelux Economic Union* was changed to *Benelux Union.* The new treaty came into effect in 2012 and from then on, alongside strengthening their cooperation, the Benelux focused on further development of the internal market, economic union, sustainable development, justice and home affairs as well as cross-border police cooperation (Antoine 2021) (Council of European union 2008).

The Benelux Union treaty involves the establishment of five institutions, which are:

- Benelux Committee of Ministers, which is the main decision–making body determining the priorities of the Union;
- Benelux Council, which provides the preparation of files for the Committee of Ministers and consists of high officials from national ministries;
- Benelux General Secretariat, which ensures the cooperation on economy, sustainability and security;
- Benelux Interparliamentary Consultative Council, where 49 deputies from the member countries provide information and advice to their respective governments;
- Benelux Court of Justice, which interprets and applies Benelux legislation (Secretariaat-Generaal Benelux 2020a) (Government of Luxembourg 2020).

The Benelux' three member states take yearly turns in holding the presidency of the Minister's Committee. The chair of the Committee of Ministers in 2021 is held by Belgium. It implements the initiatives declared by the Committee, specifically strengthening the relations with the EU. The Presidency also realises the projects set in the Benelux' Annual Plans and work programmes (Secretariaat-Generaal Benelux 2020b).

Close cooperation between the leaders of Benelux is demonstrated by frequent meetings of the prime ministers, who meet regularly before the European Council to discuss their positions and find common grounds. However, according to a senior Luxembourg official, the meetings of the ministers are held less often in recent times than before the COVID pandemic period (Interview 3).

The Benelux also intensifies their cooperation with other EU members and minilateral groups. In this, the Baltic and Nordic states can be considered their most significant partners. This cooperation was demonstrated at the trilateral conference, which took place on the 21st of May 2021 (Baltasam 2021). However, as it will be indicated below, the Netherlands often has differing preferences and opinions to the rest of the Benelux. As Caroline de Gruyter, a Dutch journalist and regular contributor to Carnegie Europe and Foreign Policy, indicated in one of her articles, external partners tend to perceive the Benelux countries diversely, too; this became particularly apparent when German chancellor Angela Merkel invited the Dutch prime minister along with the Scandinavian heads of states to discuss the future of Europe after Brexit, but not the representatives from Belgium and Luxembourg. The author generally sees the Netherlands' relations with Scandinavians as positive, however, she is also emphasising the importance of the Benelux group in fostering alliances with other formations in the EU, namely the Visegrad Group (Gruyter 2018).

ANALYSIS OF THE VOTING RECORDS

This part of the study will focus on the analysis of voting data during both the observed periods. When the overall voting in both periods is examined, it can be observed that the Benelux countries are not the closest partners in terms of voting behaviour, and in certain policy areas, they are not even among the first ten countries with the highest level of vote similarity. However, the data

indicates that the overall level of cooperation is greater than expected (see Tables 1, 2, 3). According to the permutation test, the Benelux countries cooperate and coordinate with each other on a high level, as all three values of cooperation are higher than expected and as they are significant on the level of 1%, we can reject the null hypothesis with a 99% certainty. The countries of Benelux indicate the highest vote similarity with France, even though they do not share the same positions in some policy areas (see Tables 1, 2, 3). The main reason for the high levels of vote similarity is the conformist character of France, which has the highest share of supporting votes among EU Member States.

The vote similarity between Belgium and Luxembourg as well as the Netherlands is significantly lower in the second observed period. Previously, the vote similarity with Luxembourg was 98.07%, now decreased to 95.36%. With the Netherlands, it stood at 95.11%, now dropped to 93.97% (IFAT 2021). The vote similarity in the first period between the Netherlands and Luxembourg was 95.26% and 95.11% with Belgium with levels of cooperation greater than expected (IFAT 2021).

Based on the voting data, it can be stated that the Benelux are the most like-minded European member states in terms of economy, employment & social policy, environment & health, fishing, foreign affairs, internal market & consumer affairs, telecommunication & transport, justice and home affairs & institutional policies. These fields show high and relatively stable vote similarity as well as a great level of cooperation (IFAT 2021). Meanwhile, we can perceive lower values of vote similarity in terms of agricultural policy. During the first observed period, the vote similarity between Belgium and Luxembourg was at 93.51% and at 91.91% between Belgium and the Netherlands. It has to be mentioned here that the level of cooperation between Belgium and Luxembourg on the concerned topic was smaller than expected.

However, data indicates that the level of cooperation was greater than expected between the Netherlands and Belgium, as well as between the Netherlands and Luxembourg. Vote similarity between Luxembourg and the Netherlands was 92.21% (IFAT 2021). The decline of vote similarity can be clearly seen in the second observed period, when the similarity between Belgium and Luxembourg fell to 88.46%, between Belgium and the Netherlands to 73% and between Luxembourg and the Netherlands to 76.92%. The levels of cooperation were smaller than expected, too, which makes the Netherlands the least suitable partner for Luxembourg in agricultural policy (IFAT 2021). It must be emphasized that the level of consensus in this policy area declined

across all 28 countries. This development can be linked to a reform of the Common Agricultural Policy, which came into force in 2014 (European Commision 2013).

Concerning the energy, industry, research & space policies, a change in vote similarity can be seen among the three countries, too. Whereas in the first period the Benelux countries voted unanimously in all proposals, the vote similarity between Belgium and Luxembourg and the Netherlands declined to 69.23% in the second period. However, this change is only seen in Belgium's relation towards the other countries of the group, since the vote similarity between Luxembourg and the Netherlands remained at 100%, just as in the first period.

By examining the synchronous opposition performed by Benelux countries, we can state that each country displays different contestation behaviours. The highest number of blocking attempts was carried out by the Netherlands, in a total number of 29 (see Table 5), with intention to block the proposals in the policies of concerning finances, agriculture and justice and home affairs and institutional policies. This number decreased to 20 in the second period, so the Netherlands evidently became more conformist (IFAT 2021). The biggest change in blocking behaviour can be seen in the case of Belgium, which performed 7 blocking attempts during the first period and 15 during the second. This shows that the country's voting behaviour became noticeably more conflictual. The majority of oppositions in both periods took place in regards to agricultural issues, but in regards to policies of internal market and consumer affairs, justice, home affairs and institutional and telecommunications & transport, there were occasions, too (IFAT 2021). The lowest number of non-supporting votes was cast by Luxembourg with 15 votes (see Table 6), mostly in areas of agriculture, telecommunications & transport, environment & health, internal market & consumer affairs and finances.

In sum, it can be stated that of the 675 proposals brought to vote during the first period, the Benelux countries tried to block 43. This appears to be almost the same number as during the second period, where they attempted to block 41. However, in the second period, the total number of proposals decreased from 675 to 431, thus the relative share of non-supporting votes increased, so the voting behaviour of the Benelux countries became more conflictual (IFAT 2021).

For all the 675 proposals in the first period, the Benelux countries attempted only one synchronous opposition (IFAT 2021). The Benelux and five other countries voted against the adoption of the legislative act in the configuration

of General Affairs (area of Internal market & Consumer Affairs) regarding the terms of protection of copyright and related rights (2008/0157(COD)). A possible reason for this opposition can be found in the statement issued by Belgium, which: *"believes that a term extension is not an appropriate measure to improve the situation of the performing artists."* The proposal was approved by a qualified majority even though Belgium and Sweden, which were the only opposing countries providing statements, expressed their willingness to examine the proposal and modify it so that it would become agreeable for them (2006/116/EC).

Other than the opposition analysed above, the Benelux countries attempted three bilateral synchronous oppositions during the first observed period. First was the blocking attempt of Belgium and the Netherlands in the configuration of competitiveness in the policy area of agriculture (Position (EU) No 3/2010). Here, the striking aspect is that even though Belgium and the Netherlands had common positions, they did not provide a common statement (Position (EU) No 3/2010). Luxembourg and the Netherlands performed two synchronous oppositions, both concerning the configuration of General Affairs: one was dedicated to the policy area of agriculture, the other to the policy area of finances.

During the second period, the Benelux countries did not attempt any synchronous opposition. At the same time, the number of bilateral oppositions rose. Belgium performed the most synchronous opposition votes with the Netherlands by five votes, but these attempts did not have any political relevance and were all concerning more technical issues. In four of those cases the two countries opposed proposals together, but expressed different reasons it. A common statement was provided on only one proposal, in the policy area of internal market & consumer affairs (2013/0246 (COD)).

The high number of synchronous oppositions indicates that Belgium and the Netherlands cooperate in blocking attempts even if their reasons for blocking a proposal usually differ. This supports the argument that Benelux countries are actively looking for opportunities to cooperate and, if the countries see the common interest, they unite and thereby strengthen their respective individual positions.

ANALYSIS OF THE INTERVIEWS

This part of the study will be dedicated to the analysis of interviews conducted with representatives of the Benelux countries. The general remark perceived from the interview is that Benelux as a minilateral format has a high level of

institutionalisation and thus cooperation, but not necessarily on all topics. The individual countries seek common grounds for cooperation; however, when different interests occur, they are looking for partners in other EU countries, too.

In general, the cooperation between the Benelux countries is described by the interviewees as "fluid" (Interview 4) or "...hard to describe, as this coordination could be very informal and ad hoc, so it depends on the topic" (Interview 1). All three interviewees stated that the regularity and level of cooperation depend on the topics concerned (Interviews 1, 3, 6), and that "the coordination is more intense on justice and home affairs issues, because it is one of the priorities that has been identified in the Benelux Treaties to have cooperation on this issue" (Interview 1). However, representatives of Benelux countries meet and cooperate more regularly at "... the level of directorate-generals of our Ministry of Home Affairs" (Interview 1), and at the "secretary-general level of foreign ministries [...]", and the levels of "PermReps and the DPRs meet... fairly regularly" (Interview 3). Concerning meetings before the European Council "the prime ministers meet every time" (Interview 3) and discuss topics to see "whether there are points where they can reinforce each other" (Interview 6). The interviewees emphasised that an important part of their cooperation is the rotating half-yearly presidency, when the parliaments sit together and representatives have a chance to discuss possible cooperation (Interviews 3, 6).

When asked about the unity at negotiation processes at COREPER I and II, the interviewees declared different positions. On one hand, it was stated that "we are rather united when coordinating in advance of the meetings, but we do make separate interventions" (Interview 1). On the other hand, two other interviewees declared that "it is not a situation that we agree beforehand and we go into the negotiation and then we stay together" (Interview 3). The Dutch interviewee also denied that such a habit existed among the countries, further explaining that different topics demanded different coalitions (Interview 6). However, interviewees' statements comply with the motif of mutual support in topics of common interest. Benelux' unity thus lies in "being aware of the other two partners' positions, trying to be supportive" (Interview 3) and in assisting "each other's interventions on specific points of interest" (Interview 1). At the same time, if the members cannot seem to find unity, "there is no institutionalised meeting on the COREPER or the Antici level...to determine the agendas" (Interview

6). So even though Benelux countries communicate before the meetings and discuss their positions to cooperate, when it comes to differences of interest, Benelux countries look for partners among the rest of EU27, too.

The following part will be dedicated to cross-checking the interviewees' claims with voting data gathered for this research. Concerning matching interests, the respondents named justice and home affairs, internal market and economy alongside issues of cross-border cooperation (JHA) (Interview 1), rule of law (GAC) (Interviews 1, 3, 6), enlargement (GAC) (Interview 1), banking union or taxation (Economy) (Interview 1) as the policy areas in which Benelux countries tend to be like-minded and share common preferences. Further, the respondents stated that in policy standpoints concerning climate (ENVI) (Interviews 3, 6) and migration (JHA) (Interview 3), the Benelux countries stand united.

Concerning the policy area of justice and home affairs & institutional, the countries show a relatively high vote similarity. Between Belgium and the Netherlands, the vote similarity in mentioned policy area is 92.26%. However, their overall vote similarity, which is calculated as average of all policy areas, is 94.67%. Thus, despite the claims of similar preferences in this policy area made by interviewee (Interview 1), vote similarity in justice and home affairs & institutional is below the average. Claims about the particularly high compliance are only accurate in the case of Belgium and Luxembourg, which display a vote similarity of 96.13%. Despite the interviewee's claim, the vote similarity between Luxembourg and the Netherlands, too, is below average at 91.61% (IFAT 2021). The lower level of vote similarity among these countries in comparison to average overall voting similarity does not mean that there are no common points of interest in JHA matters, though. The Benelux have established common initiatives such as cross-border police and judicial cooperation. These initiatives provide more opportunities to maintain public order and allow for the countries to save public resources.

In economic policy, the Benelux countries are clearly united. The vote similarity between Belgium and Luxembourg is 100% in both periods and almost 100% between each Belgium and Luxembourg and the Netherlands. However, Belgian vote behaviour shows 100% similarity with seventeen other countries and still 98% with another seven. Therefore, the reasons for high vote similarity are both fewer votes in total (50) as well as the overall similarity among the EU Member States'

stances in this area. Finally, concerning environment and health policy, vote similarity stands at 100% between the three countries during both periods; this result can be explained by similar reasons as in the case of economic policy (IFAT 2021).

Concerning the Benelux countries most contacted partners, a senior representative from Luxemburg declared that if a proposal is dedicated to the free trade or digital issues, they would contact the Netherlands (Interview 3). This claim can be partially proven to be true by the vote similarity regarding the policy of the internal market between Luxembourg and the Netherlands. Their vote similarity is 95.24%, above the value of overall voting similarity (IFAT 2021). In the same interview, it was stated that in "an issue to do more with agriculture or social and so on etc., we would definitely call the Belgians". On agriculture, overall data confirms this statement, since vote similarity between Luxembourg and Belgium is at 92.23%, but only 88.35% with the Netherlands. However, both values are below average, and data indicates that closer partners for Luxembourg in agricultural policy can be found outside of the Benelux group.

When asked about the closest partners both within and outside of the group, the representatives' statements differ. All representatives agreed that their first contacted country would highly depend on the matter being discussed (Interviews 1, 3, 6). The Belgian respondent declared the country keeps "really good contact with member states chairing the Council meetings. But we also have very good contact with France and Germany" (Interview 1). This claim can be partly supported by the overall voting data, which lists France as Belgium's number-one partner; Germany however only ranks 24th in terms of vote similarity (IFAT 2021). Nonetheless, both France and Germany can be perceived as meaningful partners due to their voting weight in QMV.

Luxembourg's representative, too, stated the country's closest partners as being France and Germany. Voting data shows the same results in this case: while France ranks as the top partner for Luxembourg (98.67%), Germany is only at place 24 (94.90%). However, the Luxembourg representative also stated other aspects potentially influencing which country they contact first, one of them being language proximity. Even though meetings of Benelux countries' representatives are generally held in English (Interviews 1, 3, 6), Luxembourg and Belgian representatives can easily talk to each other in French (Interview 3). As a third factor the seating arrangement in the Council can be mentioned, where the Luxembourg and Dutch representatives sit

close to each other and can easily consult on various topics, "whereas the Belgian colleague sits on the other side of the room" (Interview 3). These informal aspects can also play a decisive role in determining a country's close contact partners.

From the claims provided by a Dutch representative, it can be stated that for the Netherlands, the biggest partners are France and Germany as well. The respondent declared that while it used to be primarily Germany and secondary France, this has changed (Interview 6). Both partners' vote similarity cored between 90-95% during both periods, so this claim is once again supported by the data (IFAT 2021).

Discrepancies occurred in the topic of which partners the respective Benelux countries perceive as "easy to work with". From Dutch perspective, Ireland, Spain, France, Italy, Denmark, Sweden, Finland, the Baltic States and Germany can be listed as easy partners (Interview 6). Similar views were expressed in the Belgian assessment, which named France and Germany as countries with which they "very good contact" (Interview 1) existed. In contrast, the Luxembourg respondent did not share the assessment of Germany as being an easy country to work with, mentioning it was "very-very difficult to work with" Germany, as „you never know which side of the Berlin machinery they will come out on" (Interview 3). This made it „very difficult to do deals" with the country (Interview 3). Both the Belgian and Luxembourg respondents stated that France is one of the partners easiest to work with (Interviews 1, 6). Their claims can also be supported by overall voting data (see Tables 1, 2).

Concerning the issue of group identity, representatives emphasised their common pro-European orientation by claiming they were supporting deeper EU integration. Based on this the Benelux is a group which "takes the European project forward" (Interview 3), and "pretty Europe-minded" (Interview 6), as well as sharing values of "rule of law, democracy, and advancing European integration" (Interview 1). A senior Luxembourg representative also emphasised fluid cooperation as part of the Benelux identity, mentioning that "we do agree on quite a few things, but we also occasionally disagree" (Interview 3).

Regarding Brexit, the Luxembourg and Dutch representatives agree that the UK's withdrawal has had significant effects on the overall influence of France and Germany in the EU (Interviews 3, 6). In the current situation, the UK's counter-balancing ability is gone, so France and Germany "have

a specific position, and they need to cooperate more intensively and have a greater responsibility" (Interview 3). The contemporary European constellation could end up in a deadlock, where the two remaining big powers "either work closely together, and the others complain about that the two big guys calling the shots [...], or alternatively, they do not work closely together, and then they block each other and block everything" (Interview 3). In post-Brexit European politics both representatives see the Benelux gaining importance to rebalance the European power system: the Benelux has a "role of balancing the system, it has a role in somehow creating a bridge between the two top dogs and the rest of the club" (Interview 3), but also to "convince each other as a counterweight to what France and Germany have already decided" (Interview 6).

In conclusion, Benelux is trying to cooperate on every occasion the countries share common interests and coordinate with each other. However, when the countries do not share common positions, they are free to find other partners in the EU, with a special incline towards France or Germany. Both with regards to the voting data and the conducted interviews, we can state that the level of cooperation between Belgium and Luxemburg is somewhat closer to each other than it is the case for both countries towards the Netherlands. This has to do with different policy preferences in some important areas, but also with more informal reasons, like language proximity. Although the Benelux as a minilateral group is well-institutionalised and coordinated, the formation's fluid character allows its members to cooperate on various topics with various partners outside the group in order to pursue their interests.

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ANNEX

Table 1
Belgium, overall voting, period 2009-2019

Ranking	Partner Member State	Vote similarity	Relation to the expected
1.	France	97.74%	Smaller
2.	Lithuania	97.38%	Greater
3.	Cyprus	97.29%	Greater
4.	Finland	97.11%	Greater**
5.	Slovakia	97.02%	Greater***
5	Slovenia	97.02%	Greater**
5.	***Luxembourg***	***97.02%***	***Greater******
5.	Greece	97.02%	Smaller
9.	Romania	96.75%	Greater**
9.	Portugal	96.75%	Greater**
20.	***Netherlands***	**94.67%**	**Greater*****

*Significance codes: * - significant on 10% , **- significant on 5%, *** - significant on 1%.*

Table 2
The Netherlands, overall voting, period 2009-2019

Ranking	Partner Member State	Vote similarity	Relation to the expected
1.	Sweden	95.84%	Greater***
2.	France	95.30%	Smaller
3.	Cyprus	95.12%	Greater**
4.	Greece	95.03%	Greater***
4.	Lithuania	95.03%	Greater
6.	Finland	94.94%	Greater***
7.	***Luxembourg***	***94.76%***	***Greater******
8.	***Belgium***	***94.67%***	***Greater******
8.	Estonia	94.67%	Greater***
8.	Slovenia	94.67%	Greater**

*Significance codes: * - significant on 10% , **- significant on 5%, *** - significant on 1%.*

Table 3
Luxembourg, overall voting, period 2009-2019

Ranking	Partner Member State	Vote similarity	Relation to the expected
1.	France	98.46%	Greater*
2.	Lithuania	97.92%	Smaller
3.	Cyprus	97.83%	Smaller
4.	Greece	97.65%	Smaller
5.	Finland	97.56%	Greater
6.	Slovenia	97.47%	Greater
7.	Estonia	97.38%	Greater**
7.	Latvia	97.38%	Greater*
9.	Romania	97.29%	Greater
10.	Slovakia	97.11%	Greater**
11.	***Belgium***	***97.02%***	***Greater******
21.	***Netherlands***	***94.76%***	***Greater******

*Significance codes: * - significant on 10% , **- significant on 5%, *** - significant on 1%*

Table 4
Belgium, synchronous oppositions, period 2009-2019

Ranking	Partner Member State	Contestation (synchronous opposition)	Relation to the expected
1.	***Netherlands***	***7***	***Greater******
2.	Slovakia	6	Greater***
2.	United Kingdom	6	Greater*
4.	Czechia	5	Greater***
4.	Austria	5	Greater***
6.	Slovenia	3	Greater***
6.	Portugal	3	Greater***
6.	Hungary	3	Greater*
6.	Denmark	3	Greater
10.	Finland	2	Greater**
10.	***Luxembourg***	***2***	***Greater****

*Significance codes: * - significant on 10% , **- significant on 5%, *** - significant on 1%.*

Table 5
The Netherlands, synchronous oppositions, period 2009-2019

Ranking	Partner Member State	Contestation (synchronous opposition)	Relation to the expected
1.	United Kingdom	24	Greater***
2.	Sweden	15	Greater***
3.	Denmark	11	Greater***
4.	Austria	9	Greater***
5.	***Belgium***	***7***	***Greater******
6.	Ireland	6	Greater***
7.	Czechia	4	Greater
7.	***Luxembourg***	***4***	***Greater***
7.	Spain	4	Greater**
10.	Estonia	3	Greater**

*Significance codes: * - significant on 10% , **- significant on 5%, *** - significant on 1%.*

Table 6
Luxembourg, synchronous oppositions, period 2009-2019

Ranking	Partner Member State	Contestation (synchronous opposition)	Relation to the expected
1.	Czechia	6	Greater***
2.	Austria	5	Greater***
3.	***Netherlands***	***4***	***Greater******
4.	Estonia	3	Greater***
4.	Hungary	3	Greater**
6.	***Belgium***	***2***	***Greater****
6.	Denmark	2	Greater
6.	Ireland	2	Greater**
6.	Poland	2	Greater
6.	Slovakia	2	Greater**

*Significance codes: * - significant on 10% , **- significant on 5%, *** - significant on 1%.*

4.2 E3

Tamás Levente Molnár

ABSTRACT

The E3 is an informal, flexible, and non-institutionalised minilateral group consisting of France, Germany and the UK that focuses on certain aspects of foreign policy issues. The format's main strength is its effective, swift, and flexible way of cooperation, and its biggest limitation is that its exclusive nature of collaboration often leads to resistance from within the EU, which poses a certain risk to the EU's unity. Cooperation in voting behaviour between the E3 members is not reflected in their voting results. The E3 members do not prioritise the format when it comes to day-to-day operations within the Council and related working groups. The cooperation between the members is mainly realised between capital cities, and they tend to cooperate in a quite ad-hoc manner, meaning they rather turn to like-minded groups than to set formats.

Basic information

- Participating countries: France, Germany, the United Kingdom
- Combined GDP in total (in billion EUR, 2019): 8,413.33
- Combined GDP's relative share to EU28 total GDP (in %): 51.0
- Combined population in total (in million, 2019): 216,8
- Combined population's relative share to EU28 total (in %): 42.3
- Combined Council voting weights in the EU (old voting system, before 01/11/2014, in %): 24.6
- Combined Council voting weights in the EU (new voting system, after 01/11/2014, [reflecting the voting weight in 2014], in %): 41.5

Sources: Eurostat (2021a), Eurostat (2021b), Poptcheva and Devaney (2014)

INTRODUCTION

The E3 or EU3 is an informal, flexible, and non-institutionalised minilateral group consisting of France, Germany and the United Kingdom. It marks an exception from the other five minilateral groups included in the analysis due to several reasons: First, the E3 previously brought together the three biggest, economically largest, and politically most influential Member States, who differ significantly in their preferences in many EU policy areas, and often (used to) take opposing positions on several EU matters. Second, the E3 is a single-issue format, as it focuses solely on some aspects of (European) foreign policy. And third, as a consequence of Brexit, the E3 lost the UK as an EU Member State, which will have a great impact on the format's future course and its group dynamics in general.

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

The E3's origins can be traced back to the joint visit of the three countries' foreign ministers, Dominique de Villepin, Joschka Fischer, and Jack Straw, to Tehran in October 2003. The goal of the foreign ministers' visit was two-fold: On one hand, they intended to take action on the Iranian nuclear issue as the military escalation of the crisis became a real concern, while on the other, against the background of the different strategies of the three countries regarding the war in Iraq, they wanted to avoid a similar division between them in yet another sensitive issue. In the first phase of the talks (2003-2004), the E3 preferred to keep an informal profile, meaning they did not include the EU as they feared the potential deadlocks in the EU decision-making process might jeopardize the overriding goal of avoiding an escalation of the crisis (Bassiri Tabrizi and Kienzle 2020). As a result, the E3 were not able to rely on any of the EU's foreign policy tools, and also provoked dissatisfaction and criticism in many Member States such as the Netherlands, Belgium, Italy, and Spain due to their go-it-alone approach (ibid., 395).

The key to the E3's success lies in the fact that during the second phase of talks (2004-2009), the three countries included EU CFSP HR Javier Solana in the negotiations. This generated support for their matters even from previously critical EU Member States and created new impetus for the negotiations. In November 2004, they resulted in the Paris Agreement between the E3 and Iran, in which Tehran agreed to put its nuclear enrichment activities on hold in return for improved trade and political relations. Once Iran ceased

its nuclear activities under the Paris Agreement, the US, Russia and China joined the E3 in January 2006, resulting in the E3+3 or the P5+1 format. The formal negotiations between the P5+1 and Iran began in November 2013 and resulted in the Iranian nuclear accords, officially known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA).

At this early stage of the E3 the main issue of concern of the minilateral format has already been revealed, which has to do with matters of inclusiveness. It is about the level at which the E3 should include the EU institutions, and implicitly the other Member States into its dealings; what are the potential benefits of pragmatic, swift, and flexible foreign policy-actions on the one hand, and what are the potential risks of circumventing the EU, and thus creating credibility, legitimacy, and cohesion problems for the Union on the other. This dilemma has not lost its validity since the creation of the E3. In fact, as a result of Brexit, it became more relevant than ever before, as the two remaining EU Member States now have to pay special attention not to outmanoeuvre the EU for the sake of collaborating with a non-member.

The US withdrawal from the JCPOA under President Trump put one of the biggest diplomatic successes of European and E3 diplomacy in recent decades under jeopardy. However, the ever-greater transatlantic divisions only increased the necessity of enhanced E3 cooperation and consultation. According to Brattberg (2020, 2), shortly after the Brexit referendum, from July 2016 until June 2020 "France, Germany, and the UK have jointly issued or participated in at least sixty-seven different statements".[1] While most of these statements concerned the security situation in the Middle East, the most typical field of E3 cooperation, some also focused on other issues such as the "tensions in the South China Sea, democratic transition in Venezuela, and the March 2018 poisoning of former Russian spy Sergei Skripal in Salisbury" (ibid.).

Several factors will have an influence on the E3 cooperation's future course. One is the long-term arrangement between the post-Brexit UK and the EU. Under the leitmotif of "Global Britain", the UK is striving to enhance its independent diplomatic positioning, meaning a closer partnership with the US, a stronger emphasis on bilateral relationships, and a partly ideology-based detachment from the EU as envisaged in the Integrated Review of UK

1 The majority of the statements in questions were also co-signed by other partners, such as the EU HR, other EU Member States, and non-EU countries.

Foreign Policy strategy document (Lehne 2021). This places the French and German leaderships in a dilemma, as they share many foreign policy goals with their British counterpart, but at the same time cannot afford to risk the EU's unity by taking sides with the UK. Another factor is Washington's stance towards Europe and transatlantic relations in general. The Biden administration's approach to reengage with Europe might reduce the E3's utility in a string of topics where the new American leadership see things eye-to-eye with its European partners, making it redundant for the format to oppose US policy as was the case many times during the Trump administration. With this in mind, the E3 cooperation is most likely to function successfully as long as the following three conditions apply: "There is a broad alignment in strategic objectives between the UK, France and Germany; wider EU consensus has been hard to reach or the topic is one not usually discussed at the EU level; the US position is different or in opposition to that of the E3, or there is relatively little US interest or attention on the issue" (Billion-Galland, Raines and Whitman 2020, 14).

The participating countries are in some parts pursuing different interests in the cooperation. France views the E3 as a pragmatic foreign policy tool to enhance its national interests: if it is in France's interest to include the UK, such as in the case of the war in Syria, they turn to the E3; if they would like the UK not to be involved, as is the case concerning their African policy, they choose a different format. Also, the E3 brings together the three European countries most relevant on foreign and security policy, which provides Paris with more enhanced cooperation possibilities. For Germany, the format is useful to balance out its relationship with France and provides the country with increased possibilities to participate in international affairs, especially in the Middle East, and allows it to go beyond the normal national level of engagement. And finally, for the UK, the E3 provides a flexible tool to have an influence in shaping European foreign policy although not being part of the EU CFSP anymore. The E3 is also a balancing factor to the Franco-German axis (Brattberg 2020).

To conclude, the E3 is a very informal and flexible cooperation, with no institutions, presidencies or any structural body, which enables for effective foreign policy coordination, consensus building, and bridge building for the participating countries. The E3's strength lies in its effective, swift and flexible way of agreeing on common positions, but at the same time, this characteristic can be its biggest limitation as well if the three countries' mechanism of handling foreign policy is met with resistance from within the EU (Billion-Galland, Raines and Whitman 2020).

ANALYSIS OF THE VOTING RECORDS

The above-mentioned exceptional character of the E3 can be observed when analysing the voting statistics of the three countries in the Council of the EU over the examined period of 2009-2019. The reason for its exceptionality is the radically different voting behaviour of France, Germany and the UK. On the one side stands France having the lowest number of non-supporting votes in the EU28: one "against" and two "abstention" votes from the total of 1,106 votes in the various Council configurations during the examined 10 years. On the other side we find the UK leading the EU28's non-supporting vote statistics by far, having 53 "against" and 87 "abstention" votes (and an additional 66 "did not vote" votes) at the same time. And between the two is Germany[2] with both 27 "against" and "abstention" votes.

Against this background of highly different voting behaviour, one would expect significant differences in the vote similarity statistics between the three countries. Both in the case of France and Germany, the countries finished on top of the voting similarity statistics with which they share the same voting behaviour (casting only very few non-supporting votes). As it turns out, the closest allies for France are Lithuania, Cyprus, and Finland, while France, Cyprus, and Lithuania are closest for Germany (see Tables 1, 2). For both France and Germany, the UK comes last in the voting similarity statistics, and for France, Germany is placed second to last with rank 24. As for the UK, the closest partners in voting are the countries with which it either shares similar "did not vote" vote records like Ireland (mostly in justice and home affairs & institutional policies due to opt-outs) or has similar synchronous opposition records, like Sweden, or even a mixture of both, like with Denmark (see Table 3). France is ranked in fifth place in the UK's voting similarity list due to its high share of supporting votes, while Germany is at the very bottom on rank 26.

By comparing the results from both cycles, no major changes in the E3 countries' mutual voting similarity statistics can be observed. Between the French and German voting similarity statistics, a converging trend could be noticed (from 93.93% to 96.29%), while between the French and the British (from 84.15% to 76.33%), as well as between the German and the British (from 80.30% to 73.55%) a diverging trend could be recognised. This is mainly due

2 To be more accurate, if comparing the amount of the German non-supporting votes to the EU28 average, then Germany is closer to the UK's values than to the French one.

to the overall changes in the German and British voting behaviour: whereas the German became more conformist (fewer non-supporting votes), the British became more conflictual (more non-supporting votes) over time (IFAT 2021). Nonetheless, these results do not change the overall picture of the E3 countries' partner ranking in any significant way. In both French and German statistics, the UK comes last in voting similarity records. For the UK, Germany comes in second to last, and the relatively high position of France in the German and British records (first and fifth place respectively) is due to a very low share of French non-supporting votes. This statement is supported by our permutation test, which suggests that both values are smaller than expected under the null hypothesis of random contingencies.

As the E3 is an issue-specific format with a special focus on foreign policy, the analysis investigates the outcome of those votes concerning the policy area of foreign affairs in various Council configurations. The Council's dataset indicates 85 votes in this category within the two examined periods: 59 during the first, and 26 during the second. France and Germany cast only supporting votes, while the UK has altogether 15 non-supporting votes (9 "against" and 6 "abstention" votes) over the course of 10 years to show for. By taking a more thorough look at the single files that the UK attempted to block, it seems that the non-supporting votes were mainly related to the financing of foreign policy instruments. Among others, these were regarding the "financing instrument for cooperation with industrialised and other high-income countries and territories" (2009/0059(COD)), the "Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance (IPA II) 2014-2020" (2011/0404(COD)), the "Financing instrument for democracy and human rights worldwide (2014-2020)" (2011/0412(COD)), and the "Instrument contributing to stability and peace: military actors (2017-2020)" (2016/0207(COD)).[3] Out of the 15 non-supporting votes, only one could be identified as having a clear foreign policy character (it was put to a vote in the Foreign Affairs Council), namely the "Consular protection for unrepresented citizens of the Union in third countries" (2011/0432(CNS)), in which the UK abstained.

Given the fact that the three countries have diverging voting behaviours in the foreign affairs area, the voting similarity statistics show that they are, again, on the completely opposite sides when it comes to rankings: the UK is listed at the very last place for France and Germany (see Tables 4, 5), while for the UK the two others rank in the midfield due to their similarity in supporting

3 The codes relate to the Procedure IDs of the files.

votes (see Table 6). As the number of total votes in this policy area is small, performing a permutation test does not lead to any variation in the outcome of the randomisations.

The contestation statistics of the examined 10 years provide us with similar key takeaways about the E3 voting behaviour as the voting similarity statistics: the cooperation between the three countries is hardly detectable at all by simply looking at the Council's voting data. Here, there is no single synchronous opposition to be found between France and Germany as well as France and the UK (see Table 7); the only relevant constellation is the German-British one.

A look at the single files opposed synchronously by Germany and the UK reveals that they all concerned more technical issues and did not bear real political relevance. They include, among others, the vote on the "European Globalisation Adjustment Fund (EGF) 2014-2020" (2011/0269(COD)), the "Union Civil Protection Mechanism 2014-2020" (2011/0461(COD)), and the vote on "Food intended for infants and young children, food for special medical purposes, and total diet replacement for weight control" (2011/0156(COD)). Germany and the UK cast non-favourable votes alone amongst the EU28 in three instances, and the relative majority of the files with two cases concerned the policy field of employment & social policy.

Although the UK is the second closest partner of Germany and Germany the fifth closest one for the UK, the permutation test suggests that both values are smaller than expected under the null hypothesis of random contingencies when it comes to common blocking attempts, which means that the contestation preferences of both countries differ significantly, and that the synchronous oppositions might just happen randomly and there was no real cooperation between the two countries in this regard (see Tables 8, 9). Instead, Germany's real opposing partners are Austria (especially in the agriculture policy area), Hungary (no outstanding policy area), Bulgaria (especially in the environment & health policy area), and Poland (no outstanding policy area). As for the UK, the real opposing partners are the Netherlands, Sweden, and Denmark, all of them countries with a long tradition for fiscal conservatism. Thus, it is not surprising that the vast majority of the synchronous opposition votes were cast in finance and budget-related policy areas.

Focusing on the particular policy areas and the individual countries' non-supporting votes' distribution, the highest number cast by France was in agricultural policy (2 votes) and environment & health policy (1 vote), by Germany

in e internal market & consumer affairs (12 votes) and agriculture policy (8 votes), and by the UK in financial policy (41 votes) and justice and home affairs & institutional policy (22 votes).

To conclude the quantitative part of the analysis, we can state based on the data retrieved from Council's Open Data portal that there is little to no evidence for cohesiveness in the voting behaviour of the E3 countries. The cooperation between the E3 members does not show in their voting results, neither in voting similarity (overall voting, or foreign affairs voting) nor in the synchronous opposition statistics. It can therefore be concluded that either the E3's flexible, informal, non-institutionalised nature leads to a low level of cohesiveness among the members, the E3 countries' different approach to European policymaking is articulated in the diverging voting behaviours, or simply the E3 as a minilateral format does not have much relevance in the decision-making procedures in the Council. To find out which of these possible explanations applies, we performed further investigation by conducting expert interviews with national diplomats.

ANALYSIS OF THE INTERVIEWS

Concerning the E3 cooperation being a single-issue format, we discovered much accordance between what could be found in the academic literature and the interviewees' claims. According to a German official, the "E3 is a format that is very much dedicated to the resolution…of the nuclear problem in Iran…" (Interview 8). Similar views were uttered in the interview with a French official. "…The E3 group is first and foremost a group that concerns capitals and those who are in the UN missions […] that's where they will discuss Iran, the Libyan crisis, the UN Security Council resolutions, or the resolutions of the HRC…" (Interview 16). Based on these two representatives, the E3 concentrates "ninety-nine per cent on foreign policy" (Interview 16), but the constituting members individually share many preferences (outside the E3 frames), such as on the topic of institutional affairs, where they aim to keep the prerogatives of the Council against the Parliament, but at the same time actively reach out to the Parliament, stay in close contact, and exchange information (Interview 8).

From the Permanent Representations' perspective, the cooperation among the E3 members f in Brussels day-to-day business is basically non-existent. We received no evidence from any of the interviewees that the E3 members

would hold meetings, formally or informally, and coordinate their positions, be it before sessions of the European Council, the Council, or COREPER. The only exception mentioned here was the PSC, where the E3 members might meet before the session, depending on the agenda (Interview 16). But the seeming lack of cooperation in the Council and working groups does not necessarily mean the E3's level of cooperation is zero. Rather, the cooperation does not take place in these instances, but on different stages.

First of all, the E3 cooperation is mostly realised between capitals, meaning that "the ministers and high-level officials of the ministries and sometimes the head of state meet to try to discuss things and try to build convergence" (Interview 16). Therefore, the E3 has only a very marginal presence in the Brussels decision-making processes. Second, the E3 as a minilateral group is not considered a relevant factor during the negotiation processes in the various EU institutions. Instead, from the Member States' perspective, the decisive question is which country would taking which position on any given file, and based on that, which would be the coalitions of like-minded countries. The ad hoc coalitions and the fluid nature of dealing with issues are key aspects of how things function in the Council and the working groups, and therefore minilateral "formats do not have a strong reality in the day-to-day negotiation in the Brussels machinery" (Interview 16). In this regard, the overall impression of the interviews is that the minilateral formats are often more of a hindering than a helping factor in reaching agreements, as they do not provide the necessary flexibility required for the negotiations. This, however, does not mean that minilateral groups are irrelevant. On the contrary, they can turn out to be useful if they are being used productively and inclusively. Still, they are just "one tool in the toolbox amongst others" (Interview 16).

When asked about the most important contact partners in the EU28, both representatives confirmed that for both France and Germany the Franco-German tandem is the most important cooperation format (Interviews 8, 16). This is no surprise, but an important finding nonetheless, particularly against the background of their voting statistics (both voting similarity and synchronous opposition), which would suggest the partner rankings to be different (except for Germany's voting similarity statistics, where France tops the ranking). As for Germany, the next two most important contact partners in the EU28 were named to be Austria and the Netherlands (Interview 8). Here, again, the voting statistics can only confirm Austria as the second most important partner for Germany when it comes to synchronous opposition.

There are two relevant factors for whom a country contacts most: which country holds the presidency of the Council of the EU (Interviews 8, 16), and which are the partner countries being in the trio presidency of a country (Interview 8) – in both cases according to the interviewee's statements an increased level of cooperation can be observed. Finally, emphasizing again the ad hoc and fluid nature of Brussels' politics, the given file on the agenda is the most decisive aspect in determining which are the partners around the table, which are the ones who are on the other side, and which are the ones in the middle, who could be persuaded (Interview 16).

Since the French voting results in the Council show an outstanding result with an extremely low amount of non-favourable votes, we decided to include this topic and ask our interviewees for clarification on this subject. The responses we received to a certain extent put the results of the quantitative research into a different context. First, the number of votes in all of the Council configurations – 1,106 in total – during the examined 10 years does not reflect the "huge amounts of proposals of legislation put on the table of the Council" (Interview 16). The explicit preference of the EU27/28 members is "to make sure everybody is comfortable with the legislation that is being passed" (Interview 16), even if a qualified majority could be reached with some Member States being left out. This is the very reason why 94.58% of the votes in the Council in the first period and 96.47% of the votes in the second were favourable. Second, the French voting strategy is to ensure that the final text put on the table for adoption covers most of the country's points, even if it does not fully reflect their initial positions. Once it is received, there is not much reason to vote against the proposal in the Council, "because after the Council for most of the files you have the co-legislation, and you have to negotiate with EP as well. And so, if you put yourself outside the game [...] you will lose a lot of leeway in the negotiation with the European Parliament" (Interview 16). Thus, the primary aim of French diplomacy to guide and influence the piece of legislation until the very end of the procedure explains the extraordinarily low amount of non-favourable votes in the Council.

When contacted by external members outside of the group, it does not seem to be the case that the E3 would be contacted together as a group (Interview 8). However, if the issue in question concerns the JCPOA and the Iranian nuclear issue, a certain reflex can be detected, meaning the E3 members would notify each other about the contact (Interview 8).

The E3's future functioning and relevance in European politics is a subject that of concern for the interviewed diplomats. According to a French official, "the E3 group will definitely lose [...] some of its importance in the EU setting because the UK is not there anymore" (Interview 16). The coordination on EU foreign affairs with the UK should be continued but „definitely, there is no reason to discuss much cooperation in Brussels with one of the members who is not a member of the EU anymore" (Interview 16). Germany's primary preference for inclusivity in EU affairs will also have an effect on the future setting of the E3. In this context, "Germany would be very careful [...] not to sideline or to outmanoeuvre the EU or the European External Action Service" when it comes to choosing partners between the UK and the EU (Interview 8). Nonetheless, despite the UK is not an EU member anymore, the preferred language in the E3 format will remain English (Interviews 8, 16), and additionally French in some instances (Interview 16).

The UK's departure from the EU certainly has an influence on the general balance of power within the EU beyond the question of the E3's importance. In general, Member States feel the urge to reach out to new partners who might not have been considered naturally before Brexit to intensify their cooperation (Interviews 2, 4, 7, 11, 14, 15). This is especially the case for many Northern European and Central and Eastern European countries as well as Malta, who lost a most influential ally in a wide spectrum of policy areas covering the financial and budgetary policy, defence and security policy, the single market, and trade policy. The pursuit of Member States, especially small and medium-sized ones, to intensify their cooperation on various issues will likely end up in a network of coalitions of variable geometry such as the Frugal Four. It is expected that these coalitions will have greater influence on the European power struggle in the future.

Asking whether the E3 has any kind of group identity, we received positive responses describing it as a functional, mostly policy-oriented one. The E3 "shares a common responsibility for stability and peace in the Middle East region", and their common work is "based on the understanding that they have also with a view to their size and economic weight" (Interview 8). French official's response about the E3's common identity was more reserved, as he admitted that the E3's main identity lies in the foreign policy realm, but at the same time voiced his concerns about striving for a common French-German-British identity, as all three countries have strong identities on their own and mixture of the three would not make a unified identity at the end (Interview 16).

In conclusion, we did not find much evidence for the relevance of the E3 in the views of its Member States, especially when it comes to the day-to-day operations in the Council and the related working groups. The cooperation within the format is mainly realised between its capital cities, and they tend to cooperate in a quite ad-hoc manner, meaning they rather turn to like-minded groups than to set formats.

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ANNEX

Table 1
France, voting similarity, overall voting, period 2009-2019

Ranking	Partner Member State	Vote similarity	Relation to the expected
1.	Lithuania	99.01%	Smaller
2.	Cyprus	98.92%	Smaller
3.	Finland	98.73%	Greater**
3.	Greece	98.73%	Smaller
5.	Luxembourg	98.46%	Greater*
6.	Estonia	98.37%	Greater**
6.	Slovenia	98.37%	Smaller
8.	Latvia	98.28%	Smaller
9.	Romania	98.19%	Smaller
10.	Portugal	98.10%	Smaller
24.	***Germany***	***94.85%***	***Smaller***
27.	***United Kingdom***	***81.10%***	***Smaller***

*Significance codes: * - significant on 10% , **- significant on 5%, *** - significant on 1%.*

Table 2
Germany, voting similarity, overall voting, period 2009-2019

Ranking	Partner Member State	Vote similarity	Relation to the expected
1.	***France***	***94.85%***	***Smaller***
2.	Cyprus	94.58%	Greater*
3.	Lithuania	94.39%	Smaller
4.	Finland	94.21%	Greater
5.	Croatia	94.14%	Greater

6.	Greece	94.12%	Smaller
6.	Latvia	94.12%	Greater**
8.	Slovenia	94.03%	Greater
9.	Estonia	93.94%	Greater*
9.	Luxembourg	93.94%	Greater
27.	***United Kingdom***	***77.67%***	***Smaller***

*Significance codes: * - significant on 10% , **- significant on 5%, *** - significant on 1%.*

Table 3
UK, voting similarity, overall voting, period 2009-2019

Ranking	Partner Member State	Vote similarity	Relation to the expected
1.	Ireland	84.63%	Greater***
2.	Denmark	83.63%	Greater***
3.	Sweden	82.37%	Greater***
4.	Lithuania	81.37%	Greater***
5.	***France***	***81.10%***	***Smaller***
5.	Greece	81.10%	Greater**
7.	Cyprus	81.01%	Greater*
7.	Netherlands	81.01%	Greater***
9.	Finland	80.92%	Greater**
9.	Latvia	80.92%	Greater
26.	***Germany***	***77.67%***	***Smaller***

*Significance codes: * - significant on 10% , **- significant on 5%, *** - significant on 1%.*

Table 4
France, vote similarity, foreign affairs, period 2009-2019

Ranking	Partner Member State	Vote similarity	Relation to the expected
1.	***Germany***	***100%***	***No variation***
-	-	-	-
21.	Czechia	98.82%	No variation
21.	Hungary	98.82%	No variation
21.	Italy	98.82%	No variation
21.	Luxembourg	98.82%	No variation
25.	Sweden	98.82%	No variation
26.	Ireland	97.65%	No variation
27.	***United Kingdom***	***81.18%***	***No variation***

*Significance codes: * - significant on 10% , **- significant on 5%, *** - significant on 1%.*

Table 5
Germany, voting similarity, foreign affairs, period 2009-2019

Ranking	Partner Member State	Vote similarity	Relation to the expected
1.	***France***	***100%***	***No variation***
-	-	-	-
21.	Czechia	98.82%	No variation
21.	Hungary	98.82%	No variation
21.	Italy	98.82%	No variation
21.	Luxembourg	98.82%	No variation
25.	Sweden	98.82%	No variation
26.	Ireland	97.65%	No variation
27.	***United Kingdom***	***81.18%***	***No variation***

*Significance codes: * - significant on 10% , **- significant on 5%, *** - significant on 1%.*

Table 6
UK, voting similarity, foreign affairs, period 2009-2019

Ranking	Partner Member State	Vote similarity	Relation to the expected
1.	Czechia	82.35%	Greater
1.	Ireland	82.35%	Greater*
1.	Italy	82.35%	Greater
1.	Sweden	82.35%	Greater
-	-	-	-
5.	***France***	***81.18%***	***No variation***
5.	***Germany***	***81.18%***	***No variation***
-	-	-	-
25.	Hungary	80%	Smaller
25.	Luxembourg	80%	Smaller
27.	Croatia	75%	Smaller

*Significance codes: * - significant on 10% , **- significant on 5%, *** - significant on 1%.*

Table 7
France, synchronous opposition, overall voting, period 2009-2019

Ranking	Partner Member State	Synchronous opposition	Relation to the expected
1.	Czechia	1	Greater
1.	Denmark	1	Greater*
1.	Estonia	1	Greater**
1.	Finland	1	Greater**
1.	Hungary	1	Greater
1.	Luxembourg	1	Greater*
1.	Sweden	1	Greater*
-	-	-	-
2.	***Germany***	***0***	***Smaller***
2.	***United Kingdom***	***0***	***Smaller***

*Significance codes: * - significant on 10% , **- significant on 5%, *** - significant on 1%.*

Table 8
Germany, synchronous opposition, overall voting, period 2009-2019

Ranking	Partner Member State	Synchronous opposition	Relation to the expected
1.	Austria	10	Greater***
2.	***United Kingdom***	***6***	***Smaller***
3.	Hungary	5	Greater*
4.	Bulgaria	4	Greater**
4.	Poland	4	Greater
5.	Denmark	3	Greater
5.	Estonia	3	Greater**
5.	Ireland	3	Greater*
5.	Latvia	3	Greater**
5.	Slovakia	3	Greater**
8.	***France***	***0***	***Smaller***

*Significance codes: * - significant on 10% , **- significant on 5%, *** - significant on 1%.*

Table 9
UK, synchronous opposition, overall voting, period 2009-2019

Ranking	Partner Member State	Synchronous opposition	Relation to the expected
1.	Netherlands	24	Greater***
2.	Sweden	18	Greater***
3.	Denmark	12	Greater***
4.	Austria	11	Greater*
5.	Belgium	6	Greater*
5.	Czechia	6	Greater
5.	***Germany***	***6***	***Smaller***
5.	Hungary	6	Greater
6.	Italy	5	Greater*
7.	Ireland	4	Greater
11.	***France***	***0***	***Smaller***

*Significance codes: * - significant on 10% , **- significant on 5%, *** - significant on 1%.*

4.3 MEDITERRANEAN SEVEN

Matúš Mišík

ABSTRACT

The MED7 is an informal, ad-hoc, and non-institutionalised minilateral group consisting of seven members – Cyprus, France, Greece, Italy, Malta, Portugal, and Spain. Although the countries cooperate at the highest level (there have been regular summits since 2016), the cooperation is based strictly on ad hoc convergence of their positions. Voting data show that the members of this group tend to vote similarly in several areas, especially foreign affairs. Such voting is not a result of mutual cooperation though, but of different, probably domestic, reasons. Qualitative investigation showed that France is mostly utilising this platform for issues connected to the region, i.e. the southern regions of the EU, while smaller members of the group are more prone to use it to discuss shared problems and mutual challenges. Migration seems to be the most visible common priority of the MED7 group.

Basic information

- Participating countries: Cyprus, France, Greece, Italy, Malta, Portugal, Spain
- Combined GDP in total (in billion EUR, 2019): 5,906.58
- Combined GDP's relative share to EU28 total GDP (in %): 35.77
- Combined population in total (in million, 2019): 196.3
- Combined population's relative share to EU28 total (in %): 38.2
- Combined Council voting weights in the EU (old voting system, before 01/11/2014, in %): 32.7
- Combined Council voting weights in the EU (new voting system, after 01/11/2014, [reflecting the voting weight in 2014], in %): 38.5

Sources: Eurostat (2021a), Eurostat (2021b), Poptcheva and Devaney (2014)

INTRODUCTION

The Mediterranean Seven (MED7 or Southern Seven) is an informal group of EU member states consisting of (in alphabetical order) Cyprus, France, Greece, Italy, Malta, Portugal, and Spain. The group was established in 2013 in Brussels and initiated by Cyprus and Spain. It started out with annual meetings at the ministerial level, but the meetings were upgraded to the level of heads of state and government in 2016. The group will soon be joined by Slovenia; Croatia is also interested in joining in (Euractiv 2021).

The countries involved in the group differ in size (it includes both three of the biggest and two of the smallest EU member states), population, and economic output. While Cyprus and Malta are considered small states, Greece is medium-sized state, and France, Italy and Spain are big states – this characteristic plays an important role in the activity of the group as these three types of countries often have different preferences and different abilities to influence decision-making processes (formally as well as informally). Existing research has shown that the bigger member states are more likely to abstain or vote "no" than the small ones (Mattila 2004). Another major feature of the group is its position towards the rest of the Union. Before the so-called "eastern enlargement" of the EU, research argued that there was a divide within the Community when it came to voting patterns in the EU Council. The dividing line went from west to east, dividing the Union into a northern and a southern part. This division is worth mentioning because, similarly to bigger countries, the northern countries were more likely to abstain or vote against (Hayes-Renshaw et al. 2006). This changed after the eastern enlargement, when a third dimension was introduced – the eastern one. Mattila argues that „[t]he roll call analysis of voting demonstrated that the Council political space is clearly two-dimensional. The first dimension reflects the north-south cleavage found in the Council even before the 2004 enlargement" (2009: 855).

The MED7 is an informal organisation with no formal structure; no institution has developed to support the functioning of the group, nor is there any permanent form of cooperation. Collaboration is based on an ad hoc principle and no donor organisation (like, for example, the International Visegrad Fund) has been established. Coordination within the group is being carried out in an informal fashion, there is no formalised presidency over the group and its members do not publish programmes nor set agendas for the group.

ANALYSIS OF THE VOTING RECORDS

When analysing the voting data, we first looked at the voting similarities between the seven countries in the period from 2009-2019. The results are listed in Tables 1-7, with one table per country in alphabetical order. The voting similarity is rather high, with none of the pairs scoring below 96%. France seems to be the "go-to guy", as this country ranks highest in the voting similarity statistics for Cyprus, Italy, Portugal and Spain. Only for Greece, France is just the second most similarly voting country. France in turn voted most similarly overall with Lithuania (Table 2), while its closest voting country from the Southern Seven group is Cyprus with 98.92% voting similarity. Cyprus is the second country with the highest ranking when it comes to voting similarity – it has the highest voting similarity with Greece. This seems to be no coincidence (Greece is ranked no.1 for Cyprus, too, together with France) as the permutation test suggests that both values are higher than expected under the null hypothesis of random contingencies. Moreover, this relationship is also statistically significant on a 1% level. A similar situation can be observed between Malta and Cyprus (Malta at 98.19% has the highest voting similarity with Cyprus, although conversely the situation is a bit different – for Cyprus, Malta is only in third place), indicating that these two countries do as well coordinate their positions and cooperate during voting in the Council of the EU.

However, the situation with Malta is very different when it comes to the other members of the MED7 group. Compared to them, the country finds itself at the other end of the voting spectrum as it has the lowest levels of voting similarity with France, Italy, Portugal, and Spain. Malta is number three among the MED7 countries in case of Cyprus and fourth from the group in the case of France (see Tables 1 and 2). Italy and Spain are both at the bottom of the voting statistics when it comes to Cyprus, France, Greece, Malta and Portugal.

We have identified five policy areas where the analysed countries voted similarly and where there were only one or two members of the group that voted differently in some cases. These policy areas are culture & education & Youth, Economy, Employment & Social Policy, Fisheries, and Foreign Affairs. Quite surprisingly, the least unanimous voting was recorded in the area of fisheries, where Portugal and Spain still only voted differently in less than 5% of cases (they voted similarly in more than 95% of cases). This can be explained by their divergent positions to details of this very important policy area.

Another policy area where only two countries of the MED7 group did not vote in line with the other members (i.e. where the voting similarity was not 100% during the examined period) was Economy. Here, Malta and Portugal both voted differently in 2% of cases (i.e. the similarity was 98% with the rest of the group). In three other policy areas six out of the seven members of the group voted similarly. In the culture & education& youth area every country consistently voted the same, except for Italy, which had only 93.33% of similarity with the rest of the group. In employment & social policy the outsider was Malta with 94.59% similarity to the other members of the group.

We will take a closer look at the case of the foreign affairs policy area where there was the biggest overlap between individual member states of the MED7 group. This comes as a bit of a surprise as one would expect these countries to have similar positions on issues like agriculture, fisheries, or economy in general. However, especially when it comes to agriculture, it seems that all members are pursuing their own preferences that are quite often not in line with the rest of this informal group. When it comes to foreign policy on the other hand, six of the group's countries have always voted in the same way during the examined period – their match is 100%. Only Italy voted differently one time, thus its voting similarity is 98.82%. The Council's dataset includes 85 votes altogether in this category and therefore the difference in percentage is equal to a single different vote. Thus, foreign policy is the policy area with the highest voting similarity among the MED7 group. Due to this we only provide data on the case of Italy (see Table 8) as there is a 100% match between all members of the group with the exception of Italy.

Table 8 lists the other six members of the MED7 and compares their voting in the area of foreign policy with the voting of Italy. The permutation test suggests that there is no variation under the null hypothesis of random contingencies. Italy seems to be an outlier in these cases in general, as the other 14 countries have the same voting similarity (98.82%). Only seven other countries show an even lower level of similarity, with Ireland and the UK at the very end with 96.47% and 82.35% voting similarity respectively. While values of voting similarities with Ireland are smaller and with the UK greater than expected under the null hypothesis of random contingencies, these values are not statistically significant. This means that the voting pattern of these two countries could just be random, without any coordination.

Next, we looked at the two cycles observed for this research, 2009-2014 and 2014-2019, and compared voting similarities between individual members of the MED7 group. We were especially interested in the main issues identified in the first step of our analysis. The position of France was stable during both periods - however, there were some differences in voting similarities. While in the first period the similarity between France and Cyprus was 99.26%, this number fell to 98.38% during the second period. A similar trend can be observed in the case of Greece (0.58% decrease). There was an increase of 1.21%, from 97.63% in the first period to 98,84% in the second between France and Portugal and an even bigger one (1.65%) with Spain. Only minor differences were recorded in the voting similarity between France and Italy in the two periods (0.6% increase) and between France and Malta (0.16% decrease). The most interesting change happened in the foreign affairs policy area, where almost all countries from the MED7 group (except for Italy with 96.15% similarity with the rest of the group) voted exactly the same, so their voting similarity was 100% in the period from 2014 to 2019.

We also looked at the relationship between Cyprus, Malta, and Greece, as these three countries were showing important voting similarities. While Malta voted in line with Cyprus in 98.22% and Greece in 99.41% of the cases between 2009 and 2014, these numbers changed to 100% in the case of Malta but 93.88% in case of Greece. When it comes to individual policy areas, we examined changes in the area of foreign affairs as this is the area with most similar voting over the whole period. Interestingly enough, in the period of 2009-2014, the whole MED7 group voted unanimously. This is true for all EU member states except of the United Kingdom that has 81.03% similarity. During the following period (2014-2019), the situation looked a bit different, as Italy had 96.15% similarity with other members of the MED7 group and the rest of the group had still 100% voting similarity amongst themselves. In this period, other EU member states started to vote differently, too, among them the Czech Republic and Ireland.

Third, we looked at the blocking attempts made by the MED7 group. Contrary to other large members of this group, France opposed only a minimum number of proposals – it voted against only once and abstained twice. Italy and Spain were much more active in opposition, although they cast more non-supporting votes in the 2009-2014 period than in the following one – Italy voted against 8 times during the first period and abstained three times, while it voted against twice in the latter and abstained four times; Spain voted against eight times and abstained seven times in the first period and

voted against three times and abstained once during the second. Cyprus on the other hand voted against much more often during the second period compared to the first one (six and two times respectively), while Portugal did not cast a vote against at all in the second period while it voted against five times during the first. The highest number of opposing votes (including non-voting) was cast in the area of justice & home affairs (Malta cast three votes against and one abstention) in the first period and environment & health in the second period (predominantly caused by Cyprus with three votes against).

These differences also translate into a lack of synchronous opposition within the MED7 group. There was not a single occasion on which the whole group synchronously opposed an issue. At most, three countries opposed a proposal at the same time – this happened four times altogether, twice in each period. In the period of 2009-2014 it happened when Italy, Portugal and Spain together opposed one proposal in the area of telecommunication and transport (2008/0147 (COD) concerning „Charging of heavy goods vehicles for the use of infrastructure: differentiated charging", voted on in two different council formation (Education, Youth and Culture and General Affairs) (although only Italy and Spain voted against, while Portugal abstained).

In the following period of 2014-2019, the other two occasions when three out of seven members of MED7 cast opposing votes took place. Cyprus, Greece, and Malta voted against 2013/0224 (COD) („Monitoring, reporting and verification of carbon dioxide emissions from maritime transport"), while Cyprus, Greece, and Spain voted against 2016/0185 (COD) („Wholesale roaming markets"). Besides these, there were nine other occasions on which two members of the group together opposed a proposal.

Tables 9-15 show blocking attempts commonly made by several members of the MED7 group. It can be seen that Cyprus and Greece and especially Portugal and Spain share common positions when it comes to opposing proposals. The latter two share six opposition positions and the permutation test suggests that both values are higher than expected (and this is statistically significant at 99% level) under the null hypothesis of random contingencies, meaning that the synchronous oppositions were not random and there clearly is some cooperation between the two countries. The situation is similar with the other pair of countries (Cyprus and Greece), although they only shared opposition in three cases.

To conclude the quantitative part of the analysis, based on the data retrieved from Council's Open Data portal we can state that there is little to no evidence for cohesiveness in the voting behaviour of the MED7 countries. Cooperation between the MED7 members is not recognisable in the voting results, neither in the voting similarity (overall voting, or foreign affairs voting) nor in the synchronous opposition statistics. There are some sub-groups that can be identified – like Cyprus and Malta, who are sometimes joined by Greece or Portugal and Spain – however, the whole group does not show any particular voting behaviour. France seems to be the most supportive member of the group (judging from the perspective of number of opposing votes), while other, larger members of the group (Italy and Spain) seem to be much more assertive and ready to cast opposing votes. No specific policy area in which the group members would show an outstanding amount of blocking attempts could be identified.

ANALYSIS OF THE INTERVIEWS

This section is based on interviews with representatives of only three of the examined countries (France, Greece, and Malta), as we were not able to contact possible interviewees from the other four (Cyprus, Italy, Portugal, and Spain).
For the Maltese representative, the main advantage of minilateral groups is that "they can serve to identify issues that are of real concern, and these groups can serve to have a louder voice to voice concerns" (Interview 10). Similarly, our Greek interviewee named that member states of the EU that "share a common interest and common concerns [...] do understand each other in a better way" as the main advantage of minilateral groups within the Union (Interview 17). Although it is an often-heard claim that there is "a Franco-German engine", this is, according to our French interviewee, not sufficient push through a certain position as "[y]ou need also to bring on board the others, because now with the new enlargement, we are 27, which is definitely a new dynamic compared to the EU when we were 15" (Interview 16). However, on the other hand, "[t]he problem with the minilateral settings is that they are not flexible enough for the negotiation" (Interview 16). While for the Maltese official the MED7 is the main minilateral group they are member of within the EU context, other interviewees from the MED7 did not make such statements. According to the Greek interviewee, the group "face[s] common challenges, and for this reason, we have a lot of things in common" (Interviewee 17). France is part of MED7, "[b]ecause it's part of

our geography, but it's just one part of France" (Interview 16). Outside of minilateral groups, bilateral relations are particularly important to France. According to our interviewee, "the Franco-German couple [...] is at the heart of the EU construction" (Interview 16).

The MED7 is an established, yet a very informal minilateral group; "an informal scheme where we can exchange views on issues [...] of common interest" (Interview 17). Therefore, the agenda consists of "issues of common interest and common concerns" (Interview 17), there is no stable or given programme. The French use this minilateral group to discuss specific issues related to the region, just as they use other platforms to discuss other issues. It is an ad-hoc group because "[t]hat's how it works in real life" (Interview 16). According to the French respondent, this is how negotiations actually work – "it always ends up as natural groups of states that will form around the table on each and every file. And it very much differ[s] from one file to the other" (Interview 16).

Therefore, this group cannot be compared – neither in its structural nor functional position – to the Visegrad Group, which has certain structural elements. According to our Maltese respondent, there are some coordination meetings being held before European Council meetings, but they are "comparatively...much more humble in terms of setup" when compared to the Visegrad Group's setup (Interview 10).

There is a certain level of cooperation among the MED7 group members, although it is only based on informal agreements. At least once during every presidency (sometimes twice), a meeting at the level of heads of state is being held. The meetings have taken place since 2013, first at the level of ministers; later, since 2016, at the level of heads of state and governments. There are preparatory meetings before these summits; however, because not many summits take place, there are not many preparatory meetings either (Interview 17). More often preparatory meetings are being held before COREPER, especially when it comes to those meetings that deal with migration policy. However, even these meetings do not happen regularly, but on an ad-hoc basis. A more frequent and more regular type of meeting (although still informal) is the meeting of the group before the Foreign Affairs Council (FAC), "where we just exchange views on the issues that are going to be discussed, that are on the agenda" (Interview 17). These meetings are, however, often of technical and logistical nature – will the ministers attend, will they take the floor, etc.

The countries of the group share several common preferences, "[b]ut at the end of the day, [they] are never totally aligned", because there are many members with different interests (Interview 16). Malta's most overall interest is "the desire for a better functioning of the EU" (Interview 10), followed by the topics of migration and digital taxation. The issue with the latter is that there are different views within the group itself on the scope of taxation – whether it should happen on a European or a global level. Migration is the key issue and most difficult policy area for the group. One way to make it easier to find consensus in this area is to concentrate on prevention, "[b]ecause it's less controversial and member states are more on the same line" (Interview 10). The priority of this issue is due to the fact "that it affects in the first place some of the European countries in the Mediterranean" (Interview 17). However, it is not just a regional issue and therefore not only the Southern Seven should deal with it: "[t]his is something that eventually the whole Union will have to look into" (Interview 17).

Important coordination issues within the group are also connected to the situation within the surrounding region – for example, the situation in Syria, Libya or Turkey; or rather, the southern dimension of European Neighborhood Policy. France for example has a lot of contacts with Italy when it comes to Libya, and "lots of contacts with the Greek and the Cypriots when it comes to Turkey" (Interview 16). Malta coordinates most closely on migration with Italy "for obvious reasons, as we are along on the same route" (Interview 10). Another important partner on this topic is Spain; however, they consult only on specific issues and the cooperation does not happen automatically. Malta also cooperates outside the MED7 group, for example, with the United Kingdom on the matter of internal market.

The countries of the MED7 group have different positions on Brexit. It has an impact on Malta as the two countries shared similar position on trade or taxation and United Kingdom is considered to be a good and well-prepared partner for negotiations. But within the group there were some countries that had traditionally opposing preferences than the United Kingdom. However, according to our Maltese interviewee, Brexit has to be seen in a broader EU context and not just from the perspective of a group of member states. According to our Greek respondent on the other hand, Brexit will not have an impact on the Southern Seven at all, as it is an issue affecting the whole EU and not just specific regions.

When it comes to Mediterranean identity, the Maltese respondent claimed that such identity's main character is group's "Mediterranean dimension" due to the common interests and similar impact of events happening within the region on the group's members (Interview 10). However, the Maltese identify themselves also with the European Union in the sense of subscribing to its norms, rules, and values. According to the Greek interviewee, common identity within the group is based on the fact that the group "share[s] the same geography and the Mediterranean Sea" (Interview 17).

To conclude, our research has not found any relevance of the MED7 group when it comes to voting in the Council of the EU or its day-to-day functioning. It is an ad-hoc group that cooperates only in areas in which preferences converge and this does not happen often. Migration seems to be one of the few issues where members of MED7 share common positions. However, France is also connected to other groups (and especially to Germany on a bilateral level) and Italy voted differently even in the area of Foreign Affairs, in which other members of the MED7 group found unity.

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ANNEX

Table 1
Cyprus, voting similarity, overall voting, period 2009-2019

Ranking	Partner Member State	Vote similarity	Relation to the expected
1.	***France***	***98.92%***	***Smaller***
1.	***Greece***	***98.92%***	***Greater******
3.	Lithuania	98.64%	Greater**
4.	Finland	98.37%	Greater***
5.	***Malta***	***98.19%***	***Greater******
6.	Estonia	97.92%	Greater***
6.	Latvia	97.92%	Greater**
6.	Slovenia	97.92%	Greater
9.	***Portugal***	***97.56%***	***Smaller***
10.	***Italy***	***97.47%***	***Smaller***
11.	***Spain***	***97.47%***	***Greater****

*Significance codes: * - significant on 10% , **- significant on 5%, *** - significant on 1%.*

Table 2
France, voting similarity, overall voting, period 2009-2019

Ranking	Partner Member State	Vote similarity	Relation to the expected
1.	Lithuania	99.01%	Smaller
2.	***Cyprus***	***98.92%***	***Smaller***
3.	Finland	98.73%	Greater**
3.	***Greece***	***98.73%***	***Smaller***
5.	Luxembourg	98.46%	Greater*
6.	Estonia	98.37%	Greater**

6.	Slovenia	98.37%	Smaller
8.	Latvia	98.28%	Smaller
9.	Romania	98.19%	Smaller
10.	***Portugal***	***98.10%***	***Smaller***
11.	***Malta***	***98.01%***	***Smaller***
11.	***Italy***	***98.01%***	***Smaller***
13.	***Spain***	***97.83%***	***Smaller***

*Significance codes: * - significant on 10% , **- significant on 5%, *** - significant on 1%.*

Table 3
Greece, voting similarity, overall voting, period 2009-2019

Ranking	Partner Member State	Vote similarity	Relation to the expected
1.	***Cyprus***	***98.92%***	***Greater******
2.	***France***	***98.73%***	***Smaller***
3.	Lithuania	98.28%	Smaller
4.	Finland	98.01%	Greater*
5.	Croatia	97.84%	Greater**
6.	Slovenia	97.83%	Greater*
7.	Latvia	97.74%	Greater*
8.	***Italy***	***97.47%***	***Greater****
8.	***Malta***	***97.47%***	***Greater****
10.	***Portugal***	***97.38%***	***Smaller***
11.	***Spain***	***97.29%***	***Greater****

*Significance codes: * - significant on 10% , **- significant on 5%, *** - significant on 1%.*

Table 4
Italy, voting similarity, overall voting, period 2009-2019

Ranking	Partner Member State	Vote similarity	Relation to the expected
1.	***France***	***98.01%***	***Smaller***
2.	Lithuania	97.56%	Smaller
3.	***Cyprus***	***97.47%***	***Smaller***
3.	***Greece***	***97.47%***	***Greater****
5.	Croatia	97.22%	Greater**
6.	Finland	97.11%	Smaller
6.	***Spain***	***97.11%***	***Greater*****
8.	Luxembourg	97.02%	Greater
9.	Slovenia	96.93%	Smaller
10.	Latvia	96.84%	Smaller
11.	***Portugal***	***96.84%***	***Greater***
15.	***Malta***	***96.56%***	***Smaller***

*Significance codes: * - significant on 10% , **- significant on 5%, *** - significant on 1%.*

Table 5
Malta, voting similarity, overall voting, period 2009-2019

Ranking	Partner Member State	Vote similarity	Relation to the expected
1.	***Cyprus***	***98.19%***	***Greater*****
2.	***France***	***98.01%***	***Smaller***
3.	Lithuania	97.74%	Greater**
4.	***Greece***	***97.47%***	***Greater****
5.	Finland	97.11%	Smaller
5.	Slovenia	97.11%	Greater

7.	Estonia	97.02%	Greater**
8.	Latvia	96.93%	Greater
8.	Luxembourg	96.93%	Greater**
8.	Slovakia	96.93%	Greater***
12.	***Portugal***	***96.65%***	***Smaller***
13.	***Italy***	***96.56%***	***Smaller***
16.	***Spain***	***96.38%***	***Smaller***

*Significance codes: * - significant on 10% , **- significant on 5%, *** - significant on 1%.*

Table 6
Portugal, voting similarity, overall voting, period 2009-2019

Ranking	Partner Member State	Vote similarity	Relation to the expected
1.	***France***	***98.10%***	***Smaller***
2.	Croatia	97.69%	Greater***
3.	Lithuania	97.65%	Smaller
4.	***Cyprus***	***97.56%***	***Smaller***
5.	Finland	97.38%	Greater
5.	***Greece***	***97.38%***	***Smaller***
5.	***Spain***	***97.38%***	***Greater******
8.	Slovenia	97.20%	Greater
9.	Romania	97.11%	Greater**
10.	Latvia	97.02%	Greater
13.	***Italy***	***96.84%***	***Greater***
16.	***Malta***	***96.65%***	***Smaller***

*Significance codes: * - significant on 10% , **- significant on 5%, *** - significant on 1%.*

Table 7
Spain, voting similarity, overall voting, period 2009-2019

Ranking	Partner Member State	Vote similarity	Relation to the expected
1.	***France***	***97.83%***	***Smaller***
2.	***Cyprus***	***97.47%***	***Greater****
3.	Lithuania	97.38%	Smaller
3.	***Portugal***	***97.38%***	***Greater******
5.	***Greece***	***97.29%***	***Greater****
6.	Croatia	97.22%	Greater**
7.	***Italy***	***97.11%***	***Greater******
8.	Finland	97.02%	Greater
9.	Luxembourg	96.93%	Greater
10.	Slovenia	96.75%	Smaller
13.	***Malta***	***96.38%***	***Smaller***

*Significance codes: * - significant on 10% , **- significant on 5%, *** - significant on 1%.*

Table 8
Italy, voting similarity, foreign affairs, period 2009-2019

Ranking	Partner Member State	Vote similarity	Relation to the expected
1.	Austria	98.82%	No variation
1.	Belgium	98.82%	No variation
1.	Bulgaria	98.82%	No variation
1.	***Cyprus***	***98.82%***	***No variation***
1.	Denmark	98.82%	No variation
1.	Estonia	98.82%	No variation

1.	Finland	98.82%	No variation
1.	***France***	***98.82%***	***No variation***
1.	***Greece***	***98.82%***	***No variation***
1.	***Malta***	***98.82%***	***No variation***
1.	***Portugal***	***98.82%***	***No variation***
1.	***Spain***	***98.82%***	***No variation***

*Significance codes: * - significant on 10% , **- significant on 5%, *** - significant on 1%.*

Table 9

Cyprus, synchronous oppositions, overall voting, period 2009-2019

Ranking	Partner Member State	Synchronous opposition	Relation to the expected
1.	Poland	5	Greater***
2.	***Malta***	***4***	***Greater******
2.	Hungary	4	Greater***
4.	***Greece***	***3***	***Greater******
5.	Slovakia	2	Greater***
5.	Croatia	2	Greater***
5.	Bulgaria	2	Greater***
5.	Czechia	2	Greater**
5.	Austria	2	Greater*
5.	Germany	2	Greater*
11.	***Spain***	***1***	***Greater***
12.	***France***	***0***	***Smaller***
12.	***Portugal***	***0***	***Smaller***
12.	***Italy***	***0***	***Smaller***

*Significance codes: * - significant on 10% , **- significant on 5%, *** - significant on 1%.*

Table 10
France, synchronous oppositions, overall voting, period 2009-2019

Ranking	Partner Member State	Synchronous opposition	Relation to the expected
1.	Czechia	1	Greater
1.	Denmark	1	Greater*
1.	Estonia	1	Greater**
1.	Finland	1	Greater**
1.	Hungary	1	Greater
1.	Luxembourg	1	Greater*
1.	Sweden	1	Greater*
8.	***Cyprus***	***0***	***Smaller***
8.	***Greece***	***0***	***Smaller***
8.	***Italy***	***0***	***Smaller***
8.	***Malta***	***0***	***Smaller***
8.	***Portugal***	***0***	***Smaller***
8.	***Spain***	***0***	***Smaller***

*Significance codes: * - significant on 10% , **- significant on 5%, *** - significant on 1%.*

Table 11
Greece, synchronous oppositions, overall voting, period 2009-2019

Ranking	Partner Member State	Synchronous opposition	Relation to the expected
1.	***Cyprus***	***3***	***Greater******
1.	Hungary	3	Greater***
1.	United Kingdom	3	Greater
4.	Croatia	2	Greater***
4.	Slovenia	2	Greater**
4.	Poland	2	Greater*
4.	Netherlands	2	Greater*
8.	***Italy***	***1***	***Greater***
8.	***Malta***	***1***	***Greater***
8.	***Spain***	***1***	***Greater***
11.	***France***	***0***	***Smaller***
11.	***Portugal***	***0***	***Smaller***

*Significance codes: * - significant on 10% , **- significant on 5%, *** - significant on 1%.*

Table 12
Italy, synchronous oppositions, overall voting, period 2009-2019

Ranking	Partner Member State	Synchronous opposition	Relation to the expected
1.	United Kingdom	5	Greater*
2.	Austria	3	Greater**
2.	Ireland	3	Greater
2.	Netherlands	3	Greater**
5.	Czechia	2	Greater
5.	Denmark	2	Greater*
5.	***Portugal***	***2***	***Greater****
5.	Slovakia	2	Greater**
5.	***Spain***	***2***	***Greater****
10.	***Greece***	***1***	***Greater***
11.	***Cyprus***	***0***	***Smaller***
12.	***France***	***0***	***Smaller***
13.	***Malta***	***0***	***Smaller***

*Significance codes: * - significant on 10% , **- significant on 5%, *** - significant on 1%.*

Table 13
Malta, synchronous oppositions, overall voting, period 2009-2019

Ranking	Partner Member State	Synchronous opposition	Relation to the expected
1.	Poland	6	Greater***
2.	Austria	4	Greater**
2.	***Cyprus***	***4***	***Greater****
2.	Czechia	4	Greater***
5.	Slovakia	3	Greater

6.	Estonia	2	Greater**
6.	Germany	2	Greater
6.	Ireland	2	Greater**
6.	United Kingdom	2	Smaller
10.	***Greece***	***1***	***Greater***
11.	***France***	***0***	***Smaller***
11.	***Italy***	***0***	***Smaller***
11.	***Portugal***	***0***	***Smaller***
11.	***Spain***	***0***	***Smaller***

*Significance codes: * - significant on 10% , **- significant on 5%, *** - significant on 1%.*

Table 14
Portugal, synchronous oppositions, overall voting, period 2009-2019

Ranking	Partner Member State	Synchronous opposition	Relation to the expected
1.	***Spain***	***6***	***Greater******
2.	Austria	3	Greater*
2.	Belgium	3	Greater***
2.	Netherlands	3	Greater**
2.	Poland	3	Greater**
2.	United Kingdom	3	Greater
7.	Finland	2	Greater*
7.	***Italy***	***2***	***Greater****
9.	***Cyprus***	***0***	***Smaller***
10.	***France***	***0***	***Smaller***
10.	***Greece***	***0***	***Smaller***
10.	***Malta***	***0***	***Smaller***

*Significance codes: * - significant on 10% , **- significant on 5%, *** - significant on 1%.*

Table 15

Spain, synchronous oppositions, overall voting, period 2009-2019

Ranking	Partner Member State	Synchronous opposition	Relation to the expected
1.	***Portugal***	***6***	***Greater******
2.	Hungary	4	Greater***
2.	Netherlands	4	Greater**
2.	Austria	4	Greater**
5.	***Italy***	***2***	***Greater****
5.	Czechia	2	Greater
5.	Germany	2	Greater
5.	Ireland	2	Greater**
9.	***Cyprus***	***1***	***Greater***
9.	***Greece***	***1***	***Greater***
10.	***France***	***0***	***Smaller***
10.	***Malta***	***0***	***Smaller***

*Significance codes: * - significant on 10% , **- significant on 5%, *** - significant on 1%.*

4.4 NORDIC-BALTIC SIX

Levente Kocsis

ABSTRACT

The NB6 is an informal cooperation among the EU members of the Nordic-Baltic Cooperation – Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Latvia, Lithuanian and Sweden. According to the participants, the primary added value of this cooperation is enhanced sharing of information and – as perceived primarily by the Baltic states – improved coordination resulting in improved bargaining power. Based on the analysis of votes on legislative acts in the Council of the EU, we find weak evidence of group cohesion in regards to cooperation within the Council. Although several Member States not involved with the group tend to outrank group members in terms of vote similarity, a greater-than-usual similarity is found between NB6 countries. The primary forms of cooperation are meetings of heads of state and state governments prior to European Councils, and meetings between Ministers of Foreign Affairs preceding Foreign Affairs Councils. Other means of cooperation follow an ad-hoc, largely issue-based pattern. The interview respondent generally agreed that the NB6 is a loose group of like-minded countries more akin to a family than an organised group with a clear focus.

Basic information

- Participating countries: Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Latvia, Lithuania, Sweden
- Combined GDP in total (in billion EUR, 2019): 1,134.8
- Combined GDP's relative share to EU28 total GDP (in %): 6.8
- Combined population in total (in million, 2019): 27.6
- Combined population's relative share to EU28 total (in %): 5.4
- Combined Council voting weights in the EU (old voting system, before 01/11/2014, in %): 11.3
- Combined Council voting weights in the EU (new voting system, after 01/11/2014, [reflecting the voting weight in 2014], in %): 5.4

Sources: Eurostat (2021a), Eurostat (2021b), Poptcheva and Devaney (2014)

INTRODUCTION

The Nordic-Baltic Six (NB6) is a largely informal regional cooperation among the participating countries, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Latvia, Lithuania and Sweden; the European Union (EU) members of the larger Nordic-Baltic Eight (NB8) regional cooperation.

Nordic and Baltic states have been cooperating closely ever since the early 1990s. Parliamentary cooperation between the Nordic and Baltic states began in 1989 with the establishment of regular contacts between the Nordic Council (NC) and the Baltic Assembly. The NB8 format, which includes the above-mentioned six countries as well as Iceland and Norway, was established in 1992. The general intent of its establishment was to create an informal atmosphere in which important matters could be discussed, but the Nordic states also aided the newly independent Baltic states in finding their voices in various international organisations such as the United Nations or the World Bank (Kuusik and Raik 2018).

The NB6 formation was brought about by the accession of the Baltic states to the EU in 2004. Its establishment was based on a Swedish initiative with the goal of "engaging Baltic states in EU decision-making routines" (Rūse 2014, 235). Accession to the EU was a significant step towards joining "core Europe" as perceived by the Nordic States (ibid), and from a Baltic position, "the Nordics were the first to treat us equally in the EU" (Kuusik and Raik 2018, 4). Since then, the cooperation has undergone some evolution and focused more on Council configurations where cooperation could be beneficial, capitalising on the gain of bargaining power in the Council.

The interaction within the group is informal. NB6 consultations are held in the respective capitals, or through the Permanent Representations. The most stable and permanent form of cooperation is the "NB6 breakfast", held before Foreign Affairs Council, General Affairs Council, and European Council meetings. The EU Directors meetings, held in preparation of incoming Council presidencies, include a wide range of interactions ranging from expert-level meetings to meetings between heads of state and government (Rūse 2014, 234). Additionally, other meetings such as meetings between Ministers for European affairs happen on a regular basis.

Existing academic literature puts an emphasis on cooperation within the NB8 format, while the ways of cooperation within the framework of the EU are less frequently discussed. Nevertheless, the literature points out that the countries have a heterogenous set of opinions and preferences in regards to European integration. Piret Kuusik & Kristi Raik (2018) in their study titled "*The Nordic-Baltic Region in the EU: A Loose Club of Friends*" point out that, despite renewed efforts to seek closer cooperation within the EU after the departure of the United Kingdom, which had been considered " an important partner for the Nordic-Baltic states due to their shared commitment to free trade and liberal economic policies" (Kuusik and Raik 2018, 9), the cooperation remains largely informal and selective, masking significant differences in the policies and positions of the member states. Moreover, the authors argue that Finland and the Baltic states positioned themselves closer to the EU's core, seeking closer integration. This is in stark contrast to the more reserved positions of Denmark and Sweden, especially in relation to budgetary issues as signified by these countries' membership in the informal "Frugal Four" group.

Ilze Rūse (2014) in her study "*Nordic-Baltic Interaction in European Union Negotiations: Taking Advantage of Institutionalized Cooperation*" reports somewhat similar findings. Rūse claims that – using the empirical cases of the Baltic Sea Strategy, climate negotiations and the Stockholm Programme – the cooperation does show the effect of increased bargaining power brought about by institutionalised interaction. However, as Rūse argues, "institutional conditions alone cannot ensure a bargaining advantage in EU negotiations, if the preferences on the level of specific issues diverge. Though the NB6 network offers a strong potential in exerting a "regional voice" in the EU, one cannot claim that there is a persistent regional "bloc" in the EU Council negotiations" (ibid, 243).

Based on the above, it is expected that our empirical investigation will find weak evidence of cohesion within the group in regards to EU positions. We expect cooperation to be somewhat stronger in the case of Denmark and Sweden, as well as the Baltic States and Finland, largely due to their similar overall position on European integration. On the other hand, potential divergence in positions brought about by different levels of economic development should not be neglected.

ANALYSIS OF THE VOTING RECORDS

The overall voting behaviour of states comprising the NB6 shows significant differences. Remarkably, Denmark stands out as the Member State with the highest number of non-supporting votes, 120, during the observed 10-year period. The extraordinarily high number of non-supporting votes is explained by Denmark's opt-outs and non-participations in enhanced cooperation, as 90 out of the 120 were cases when the Danish representatives either did not cast a vote or did not participate in the voting. These votes were mostly concerning legislative acts in the justice and home affairs policy domain, lending further credence to the argument that these incidents are results of opt-outs and non-participations in enhanced cooperations. The remaining non-supporting votes are either votes against or abstentions during qualified majority votes, with both those options having virtually the same effect. Regarding non-supporting votes, the remainder of the group – Estonia, Finland, Latvia, Lithuania and Sweden – are rather similar with 17, 13, 15, 8 and 29 respectively.

These differences in vote distribution have an inherent effect on vote similarity statistics. One could reasonably suspect that the ratio of matching votes with any other NB6 member would be among the lowest for Denmark. Indeed, Denmark has the second-least similar voting behaviour (ranked 26th in similarity) to the other members (see Tables 2-6) and its voting patterns are more similar to those of Ireland (see Table 1). Keeping in mind the information on opt-outs and non-participations, this is hardly surprising. Nevertheless, from Denmark's perspective, all NB6 countries make it to the top ten in regards to vote similarity (see Table 1). This suggests that the apparent dissimilarity is largely due to the peculiar Danish preferences, and aside from instances where the Danish representative did not participate or cast a vote at all, there is a fair degree of similarity between the voting behaviours of Denmark and other members of the group.

Voting similarity statistics (see Table 2) reveal that the preferences of Estonia in the period 2009 – 2019 were the most similar to those of France, with a similarity of 98.37%. The second and third most similar are Lithuania (98.1%) and Cyprus (97.92%), followed by Finland (97.83%) and Latvia (97.83%). The remaining two NB6 members, Denmark and Sweden, are ranked 26th and 18th with 88.34% and 96.56% similarity respectively.

In the case of Finland (see Table 3), the votes of France were found to be the most similar (98.73%), followed by Cyprus (98.37%). Lithuania is 3rd (98.28%), Greece is 4th (98.01%), followed by Estonia (97.83%) and Latvia (97.74%) in the 5th and 6th places. In a somewhat similar way to Estonia, Sweden is 17th (96.84%) and Denmark is 26th (88.88%).

Most similar to the votes of Latvia are those of Lithuania (98.46%). France (98.28%) and Cyprus (97.92%) follow, while Estonia (97.83%) and Finland (97.74%) are ranked 4th and 5th respectively (see Table 4). Once again, the remaining two members, Denmark and Sweden, are ranked 26th (88.25%) and 18th (96.84%).

For Lithuania (see Table 5), vote similarity was the highest with France (99.01%), followed by Cyprus (98.64%). Latvia is ranked 3rd with 98.46%, followed by Romania (98.46%) and Finland (98.28%). Estonia is in 6th place (98.10%), while – again – Denmark and Sweden are ranked 26th (89.15%) and 18th (96.84%).

Finally, in the case of Sweden, France (97.20%) was found to be the most similar regarding voting characteristics. Finland and Lithuania are 2nd with 96.84%, Cyprus and Greece are 4th (96.75%) and 5th (96.56%). Other group members occupy lower ranks: Latvia comes in 7th (96.29%) and Estonia 9th (96.20%), while Denmark is 26th (88.25%).

These vote similarity statistics suggest that while the voting characteristics of these states are dissimilar to a degree, there is some internal cohesion present in regards to voting preferences: the employed permutation test, which controls for the voting characteristics of Member States, tells us the observed similarity values are significantly higher than expected under the null hypothesis of randomly cast votes. This fact highlights the probability of observed dissimilarity masking existing coordination within the group. Moreover, Denmark and Sweden consistently rank low for other group members. This observation suggests that these two countries somewhat stand out and have significantly different preferences from the others. As it shall be shown, financial issues – budgets included – stand out as a policy area where preferences diverge.

The analysis of failed blocking attempts yields somewhat similar results. For Denmark (see Table 7), the United Kingdom was found to be its closest partner (12), followed by the Netherlands (11). From the countries of the group, only Sweden makes it to the top five with seven synchronous

contestations. All of these results were found to be significantly higher – in a statistical sense – than expected under the null hypothesis of randomness. Significant cooperation with Finland, ranked 7th, was also observed (3 synchronous oppositions). However, no evidence of cooperation with the Baltic states could be found.

Estonia's greatest partners in opposition was Austria (4), followed by several other countries that are not members of NB6 (see Table 8). From inside the group, cooperation seems the strongest with Finland, Latvia and Sweden with two contestations each which both were found to be statistically significant. Estonia and Denmark had only one synchronous contestation, while Estonia and Lithuania had none.

According to our findings, the most important partners for Finland were Denmark, Hungary, Sweden and the United Kingdom with three synchronous contestations (see Table 9) each. In the case of the United Kingdom, this value according to the permutation test employed is not significantly different from what would be expected under the null hypothesis of randomly cast votes. With the Baltic states, evidence for cooperation is weak at best. Arguably, there is some evidence of cooperation with Estonia (2), but with the other Baltic states, only one synchronous contestation was recorded.

Poland seems to be the most important partner for Latvia with five contestations, followed by Germany, Hungary and the United Kingdom (3). All of these except for the United Kingdom (see Table 10) are significantly higher than expected under the null hypothesis. Estonia and Lithuania are ranked 5th with two contestations. This value is higher than expected only in the case of Estonia. We found only one case of synchronous contestation with Finland and Sweden, and zero with Denmark.

The closest partners of Lithuania were found to be Hungary and Poland (3). The value is higher than expected in both cases (see Table 11). Latvia is ranked 3rd, with two contestations, while Denmark and Finland are ranked 6th (1). Based on our findings, Lithuania shared no failed blocking attempts with Sweden or Estonia.

For Sweden, the United Kingdom was the closest partner in opposition (18), followed by the Netherlands (15) and Austria (8). We only found a higher-than-expected number of synchronous contestations in the case of Denmark (7), Finland (3) and Estonia (2).

Investigating synchronous contestations in the policy area of finance (budget included) gives further insight. In the case of Denmark, the remaining members of the Frugal Four and the United Kingdom were found to be the most frequent partners in opposition. The Netherlands, Sweden and the United Kingdom four times opposed acts together with Denmark, while Finland did it once (see Table 13). In the former three cases, the numbers were significantly higher than one could expect under the hypothesis of randomly cast votes. According to the voting results, synchronous oppositions of Estonia with other Member States were rare during the observed period. Estonia contested legislative acts synchronously with Bulgaria, Hungary, Portugal and Spain on only one occasion (see Table 14).

Despite not being a member of the Frugal Four, Sweden (2 oppositions) and the United Kingdom (2) were found to be the most important among Finland's partners in opposition. Furthermore, Finland had a single synchronous opposition with several other EU Member States such as Belgium, Latvia, Germany, Portugal and Slovenia, but also Denmark, the Netherlands and Austria (see Table 15). This seems to suggest that the Finnish positions on financial and budgetary issues were somewhat similar to those of the Frugal Four, yet more lenient towards "newer" Member States such as the Baltic countries. Latvia registered a single synchronous contestation with several Member States, namely Austria, Belgium, Czechia, Finland, Luxembourg, Portugal, Sweden and the United Kingdom (see Table 16), while Lithuania had none. The strongest partner of opposition in the case of Sweden was found to be the United Kingdom (13), followed by the Netherlands (12), Austria (5) and Denmark (4). Finland ranks 5th with two synchronous contestations. Regarding other NB6 members, a single synchronous contestation was observed with Latvia (see Table 17).

All in all, the above analysis of synchronous contestation suggests cohesion to be strongest among Sweden, Denmark, and Finland, with the latter having stronger ties to the Baltic states. Cooperation regarding blocking attempts for them was found to be the strongest in the policy area of finance. The general takeaway of this quantitative analysis is that while we found some weak evidence of coordination within the NB6, the group seems to be partitioned into Nordic and Baltic members. The data suggests that Finland has the closes ties to the Baltic states, especially Estonia, and hence acts as a bridge between Nordic and Baltic members. This constellation could be explained by the Baltic states' and Finland's pro

integration attitudes contrasted with the more reserved positions of Denmark and Sweden as well as by the divergence of preferences between "old" and "new" EU Member States.

Additionally, the data reveals that the members of the NB6 have remarkably different policy positions, making it difficult to capitalise on the potential increase in bargaining power. Thus, the primary benefit of the cooperation is the frequent exchange of views and information. These findings are largely in line with the related literature.

ANALYSIS OF THE INTERVIEWS

This section discusses the interviews conducted with Danish, Estonian, Finnish, Latvian and Swedish officials or retired officials. As will be shown, findings based on these interviews are largely in line with the literature and the statistical data discussed in the previous section.

When asked about the benefits of cooperation, all interviewees highlighted the value of enhanced information sharing and improved coordination (Interviews 2, 4, 11, 12, 14). Additionally, except for the Finnish respondent, all interviewed officials mentioned the possibility of greater negotiating power in cases in which a common position is possible. However, the interviewees mentioned several possible downsides of minilateral groups. The Estonian, Finnish and Swedish respondents pointed out that such groups that are mostly based on geographical proximity bear the possibility of creating new as well as exacerbating existing cleavages between EU Member States (Interviews 4, 11, 12). With the words of the Swedish respondent, "there is always a risk of a [...] one member of the minilateral group convincing a large, the entire group of going in a certain direction, which, maybe, is not very positive in the view of the other Member States" (Interview 4). The Latvian respondent also mentioned the possible occurrence of further fragmentation among Member States as a potential downside, but only "from the Brussels perspective" (Interview 14). As a further downside, the Danish respondent mentioned that group pressure might prevent members from taking a different position from that of their peers. As the interviewee put it, "we often hear from some of the Visegrad countries that, no, we cannot do that, we agree with you, but we cannot do that, because in the Visegrad we have to look after the cooperation". Interestingly, the Danish and Swedish respondents had generally negative opinions towards the Visegrad Group.

The respondents all consider their states to be members of several other formal or informal minilateral groupings as well. All of the interviewees highlighted their respective countries' participation in the Northern-Baltic Cooperation (Interviews 2, 4, 11, 12, 14). Naturally, the Nordic respondents – Denmark, Finland and Sweden – also mentioned the Nordic Council (see Tables 2, 4, 12), while the respondents from the Baltic states additionally mentioned the Baltic Cooperation (Interviews 11, 14). The Danish and Swedish interviewees further mentioned the "Frugal Four" as a group they consider their states to be members of (Interviews 2, 4).

All respondents classified the NB6 as an informal group with its intensity of cooperation varying from case to case. Meetings between heads of state prior to European Councils were mentioned by all respondents (Interviews, 2, 4, 11, 12, 14) and except for the Finnish interviewee, they all confirmed the occurrence of regular meetings before Foreign Affairs Councils. In relation to the latter, the Danish respondent added: "it has proven difficult because of [...] flight times and the start of the meetings" (Interview 2). Meanwhile, no structured cooperation was reported on the lower levels.

Cooperation was said to be the strongest in the area of foreign affairs by all respondents (Interviews 2, 4, 11, 12, 14). The Danish and Estonian officials mentioned general question related to the internal market, where all NB6 members usually have similar positions (Interviews 2, 11). Other than these, cooperation was reported to take place on a case-to-case basis.

When asked about the possible consequences of Brexit, all responses except for the Finnish agreed that its impact was significant (Interviews 2, 4, 11, 12, 14). The Swedish respondent highlighted that their "alliance building will have to be even better post-Brexit", but they "shouldn't be locked up in any formalised cooperation with the Nordic-Baltics, or with anyone else" (Interview 4). Contrary to this, Estonian and Latvian respondents argued that closer cooperation was necessary among NB6 members (Interviews 11, 14).

To the question asking which NB6 Member State they coordinate or exchange views with most regularly, the Estonian respondent named Finland, Latvia and Lithuania as the most important, but added that there were issues on which Denmark or Sweden were deemed more important (Interview 11). According to the interviewees, Sweden and Estonia were the most frequent partners of Finland (Interview 12), Estonia, Lithuania for Latvia (Interview 14) and Finland and Denmark for Sweden (Interview 4). The Danish respondent did not give a clear answer to the question (Interview 2). In a broader EU

context, every one of the respondents named Germany as the first state they usually exchange views with. The Swedish and Danish respondents mentioned the Netherlands as a close second (Interviews 2, 4).

Regarding a common identity, the respondents had somewhat different answers. The interviewed Estonian official answered that "it would be better actually to hear from someone outside how they perceive the NB6" (Interview 11). The Swedish respondent similarly preferred external perceptions in that regard, i.e. responded that it mattered more how outside Member States perceived their group (Interview 4). Moreover, according to the Swedish respondent, the group's identity is largely policy-oriented and mostly focused on foreign affairs. The others perceived some group identity, though differently. For the Finnish interviewee it is about regional identity: "it's about a stronger feeling towards the North" (Interview 12). As perceived by the Danish respondent, the NB6 identifies as an informal cooperation that "we all enjoy participating [in]" (Interview 2) and the value of this cooperation is evident to all participants (Interview 2). According to the Latvian respondent, the NB6 is "value based, pragmatic, informal and focusing on big issues" (Interview 14). Interestingly, the Latvian respondent was the only one to say, though somewhat indirectly, that the NB6 is based on shared values.

When asked about whether or not the "old" and the "new" EU Member States were treated differently within the group, the respondents generally agreed that all members receive the same treatment. The Estonian respondent said "I think they are on the same level. Maybe also because the Scandinavian countries who are with us in the NB6 did not join so long ago" (Interview 11). Nevertheless, the Finnish interviewee mentioned that upon the accession of the Baltic states, "they [Finland] were trying to be a kind of tutor or help the new Member States closest to us", adding that "when they negotiated, we were closely cooperating especially with the Estonians" (Interview 12)

All in all, the interviews confirm the finding of the related literature that the NB6 is a loosely knit group of like-minded countries. As the Danish respondent put it, "we [NB6] are a flexible group, we don't have positions which are firmly aligned all the time and [it] is not necessary, but we have the same mindset" (Interview 2).

Some evidence for a partition along the Nordic-Baltic axis was also uncovered. As the Latvian interviewee said, "when arriving in Brussels at the Permanent Representation then we start first with a phone call to our

Lithuanian and Estonian colleagues" (Interview 14). Perhaps this "division" is better explained by the different development levels of the countries: the Estonian interviewee highlighted "having net payers and net receivers in the same group, of course, created some interesting dynamics because [...] the doors were open not quite the same when we tried to reach a common understanding between us" (Interview 11).

To conclude, the respondents agreed that the NB6 is a loose, informal cooperation of the Nordic-Baltic states, and they themselves generally see this cooperation as beneficial. With the words of the Danish respondent, "it is a good group to [...] have the entire spectrum of different kinds of EU positions together in one group. Missing of course the Mediterranean part, but being the Mediterraneans of the North, we can deliver that..." (Interview 2).

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ANNEX

Table 1
Denmark, voting similarity, overall voting, period 2009-2019

Ranking	Partner Member State	Vote similarity	Relation to the expected
1.	Ireland	93.04%	Greater***
2.	***Lithuania***	***89.15%***	***Greater******
3.	France	89.06%	Greater*
4.	***Finland***	***88.88%***	***Greater******
5.	Cyprus	88.79%	Greater**
6.	Romania	88.70%	Greater***
7.	Greece	88.61%	Greater**
8.	***Estonia***	***88.34%***	***Greater****
9.	***Latvia***	***88.25%***	***Greater****
9.	Malta	88.25%	Greater***
9.	Slovenia	88.25%	Greater**
9.	***Sweden***	***88.25%***	***Greater******

*Significance codes: * - significant on 10% , **- significant on 5%, *** - significant on 1%.*

Table 2
Estonia, voting similarity, overall voting period 2009-2019

Ranking	Partner Member State	Vote similarity	Relation to the expected
1.	France	98.37%	Greater**
2.	***Lithuania***	***98.10%***	***Greater******
3.	Cyprus	97.92%	Greater***
4.	***Finland***	***97.83%***	***Greater******
4.	***Latvia***	***97.83%***	***Greater******
6.	Greece	97.65%	Greater*
6.	Slovakia	97.65%	Greater***
8.	Romania	97.56%	Greater***
9.	Luxembourg	97.38%	Greater**
10.	Slovenia	97.20%	Greater
18.	***Sweden***	***96.65%***	***Greater****
26.	***Denmark***	***88.34%***	***Greater****

*Significance codes: * - significant on 10% , **- significant on 5%, *** - significant on 1%.*

Table 3
Finland, voting similarity, overall voting, period 2009-2019

Ranking	Partner Member State	Vote similarity	Relation to the expected
1.	France	98.73%	Greater**
2.	Cyprus	98.37%	Greater***
3.	***Lithuania***	***98.28%***	***Greater****
4.	Greece	98.01%	Greater**
5.	***Estonia***	***97.83%***	***Greater******
6.	***Latvia***	***97.74%***	***Greater******
7.	Luxembourg	97.56%	Greater
7.	Slovenia	97.56%	Greater
9.	Portugal	97.38%	Greater
9.	Slovakia	97.38%	Greater***
17.	***Sweden***	***96.84%***	***Greater******
26.	***Denmark***	***88.88%***	***Greater******

*Significance codes: * - significant on 10% , **- significant on 5%, *** - significant on 1%.*

Table 4
Latvia, voting similarity, overall voting, period 2009-2019

Ranking	Partner Member State	Vote similarity	Relation to the expected
1.	***Lithuania***	***98.46%***	***Greater******
2.	France	98.28%	Smaller
3.	Cyprus	97.92%	Greater**
4.	***Estonia***	***97.83%***	***Greater******
5.	***Finland***	***97.74%***	***Greater******
5.	Greece	97.74%	Greater*
7.	Slovakia	97.65%	Greater***
8.	Romania	97.56%	Greater***
9.	Luxembourg	97.38%	Greater*
10.	Slovenia	97.29%	Greater
18.	***Sweden***	***96.29%***	***Greater******
26.	***Denmark***	***88.25%***	***Greater****

*Significance codes: * - significant on 10% , **- significant on 5%, *** - significant on 1%.*

Table 5
Lithuania, voting similarity, overall voting, period 2009-2019

Ranking	Partner Member State	Vote similarity	Relation to the expected
1.	France	99.01%	Smaller
2.	Cyprus	98.64%	Greater**
3.	***Latvia***	***98.46%***	***Greater******
3.	Romania	98.46%	Greater***
5.	***Finland***	***98.28%***	***Greater****
5.	Greece	98.28%	Smaller
7.	***Estonia***	***98.10%***	***Greater******
8.	Slovakia	98.01%	Greater***
9.	Luxembourg	97.92%	Smaller
9.	Slovenia	97.92%	Smaller
18.	***Sweden***	***96.84%***	***Greater***
26.	***Denmark***	***89.15%***	***Greater******

*Significance codes: * - significant on 10% , **- significant on 5%, *** - significant on 1%.*

Table 6
Sweden, voting similarity, overall voting, period 2009-2019

Ranking	Partner Member State	Vote similarity	Relation to the expected
1.	France	97.20%	Greater*
2.	***Finland***	***96.84%***	***Greater******
2.	***Lithuania***	***96.84%***	***Greater***
4.	Cyprus	96.75%	Greater
5.	Greece	96.56%	Greater
6.	Luxembourg	96.38%	Greater**
7.	***Latvia***	***96.29%***	***Greater******
7.	Slovenia	96.29%	Greater**
9.	***Estonia***	***96.20%***	***Greater****
9.	Romania	96.20%	Greater**
26.	***Denmark***	***88.25%***	***Greater******

*Significance codes: * - significant on 10% , **- significant on 5%, *** - significant on 1%.*

Table 7
Denmark, synchronous opposition, overall voting, period 2009-2019

Ranking	Partner Member State	Synchronous opposition	Relation to the expected
1.	United Kingdom	12	Greater***
2.	Netherlands	11	Greater***
3.	Austria	8	Greater***
4.	***Sweden***	***7***	***Greater******
5.	Ireland	5	Greater***
5.	Czechia	5	Greater***
7.	***Finland***	***3***	***Greater******
7.	Romania	3	Greater***
7.	Belgium	3	Greater**

7.	Germany	3	Greater
16.	***Estonia***	***1***	***Greater***
16.	***Lithuania***	***1***	***Greater***
26.	***Latvia***	***0***	***Smaller***

*Significance codes: * - significant on 10% , **- significant on 5%, *** - significant on 1%.*

Table 8
Estonia, synchronous opposition, overall voting, period 2009-2019

Ranking	Partner Member State	Synchronous opposition	Relation to the expected
1.	Austria	4	Greater***
2.	Germany	3	Greater**
2.	Luxembourg	3	Greater***
2.	Netherlands	3	Greater**
2.	Poland	3	Greater**
2.	Slovakia	3	Greater***
7.	Belgium	2	Greater
7.	Bulgaria	2	Greater**
7	***Finland***	***2***	***Greater****
7.	Hungary	2	Greater
7.	***Latvia***	***2***	***Greater****
7.	Malta	2	Greater**
7.	Romania	2	Greater**
7.	***Sweden***	***2***	***Greater****
15.	***Denmark***	***1***	***Greater***
23.	***Lithuania***	***0***	***Smaller***

*Significance codes: * - significant on 10% , **- significant on 5%, *** - significant on 1%.*

Table 9
Finland, synchronous opposition, overall voting, period 2009-2019

Ranking	Partner Member State	Synchronous opposition	Relation to the expected
1.	***Denmark***	***3***	***Greater******
1.	Hungary	3	Greater***
1.	***Sweden***	***3***	***Greater******
1.	United Kingdom	3	Greater
5.	Austria	2	Greater
5.	Belgium	2	Greater**
5.	Czechia	2	Greater**
5.	***Estonia***	***2***	***Greater****
5.	Germany	2	Greater
5.	Netherlands	2	Greater**
5.	Portugal	2	Greater**
12.	***Latvia***	***1***	***Greater***
12.	***Lithuania***	***1***	***Greater******

*Significance codes: * - significant on 10% , **- significant on 5%, *** - significant on 1%.*

Table 10
Latvia, synchronous opposition, overall voting, period 2009-2019

Ranking	Partner Member State	Synchronous opposition	Relation to the expected
1.	Poland	5	Greater***
2.	Germany	3	Greater**
2.	Hungary	3	Greater**
2.	United Kingdom	3	Greater
5.	Austria	2	Greater
5.	Czechia	2	Greater*
5.	***Estonia***	***2***	***Greater****
5.	***Lithuania***	***2***	***Greater***
5.	Slovakia	2	Greater**
10.	Belgium	1	Greater
10.	Bulgaria	1	Greater
10.	Croatia	1	Greater
10.	***Finland***	***1***	***Greater***
10.	Luxembourg	1	Greater
10.	Malta	1	Greater
10.	Portugal	1	Greater
10.	Romania	1	Greater
10.	Slovenia	1	Greater
10.	***Sweden***	***1***	***Greater***
20.	***Denmark***	***0***	***Smaller***

*Significance codes: * - significant on 10% , **- significant on 5%, *** - significant on 1%.*

Table 11
Lithuania, synchronous opposition, overall voting, period 2009-2019

Ranking	Partner Member State	Synchronous opposition	Relation to the expected
1.	Hungary	3	Greater***
1.	Poland	3	Greater***
3.	Austria	2	Greater**
3.	Croatia	2	Greater***
3.	***Latvia***	***2***	***Greater******
6.	Belgium	1	Greater*
6.	Cyprus	1	Greater**
6.	Czechia	1	Greater
6.	***Denmark***	***1***	***Greater***
6.	***Finland***	***1***	***Greater****
6.	Malta	1	Greater
6.	Netherlands	1	Greater
6.	Romania	1	Greater*
6.	Slovakia	1	Greater*
6.	United Kingdom	1	Greater
16.	***Estonia***	***0***	***Smaller***
16.	***Sweden***	***0***	***Smaller***

*Significance codes: * - significant on 10% , **- significant on 5%, *** - significant on 1%.*

Table 12
Sweden, synchronous opposition, overall voting, period 2009-2019

Ranking	Partner Member State	Synchronousopposition	Relation to the expected
1.	United Kingdom	18	Greater***
2.	Netherlands	15	Greater***
3.	Austria	8	Greater***
4.	***Denmark***	***7***	***Greater******
5.	Czechia	4	Greater***
6.	***Finland***	***3***	***Greater******
7.	Belgium	2	Greater
7.	***Estonia***	***2***	***Greater****
7.	Luxembourg	2	Greater*
7.	Portugal	2	Greater*
7.	Slovenia	2	Greater*
12.	***Latvia***	***1***	***Greater***
20.	***Lithuania***	***0***	***Smaller***

*Significance codes: * - significant on 10% , **- significant on 5%, *** - significant on 1%.*

Table 13
Denmark, synchronous opposition, finance, period 2009-2019

Ranking	Partner Member State	Synchronous opposition	Relation to the expected
1.	Netherlands	4	Greater***
1.	***Sweden***	***4***	***Greater******
1.	United Kingdom	4	Greater***
4.	***Finland***	***1***	***Greater***
-	***Estonia***	***0***	***Smaller***
-	***Latvia***	***0***	***Smaller***
-	***Lithuania***	***0***	***Smaller***

*Significance codes: * - significant on 10% , **- significant on 5%, *** - significant on 1%.*
Note: Synchronous contestations with non-listed Member States were zero.

Table 14
Estonia, synchronous opposition, finance, period 2009-2019

Ranking	Partner Member State	Synchronous opposition	Relation to the expected
1.	Bulgaria	1	Greater**
1.	Spain	1	Greater**
1.	Hungary	1	Greater**
1.	Portugal	1	Greater**
-	***Denmark***	***0***	***Smaller***
-	***Finland***	***0***	***Smaller***
-	***Latvia***	***0***	***Smaller***
-	***Lithuania***	***0***	***Smaller***
-	***Sweden***	***0***	***Smaller***

*Significance codes: * - significant on 10% , **- significant on 5%, *** - significant on 1%.*
Note: Synchronous contestations with non-listed Member States were zero.

Table 15
Finland, synchronous opposition, finance, period 2009-2019

Ranking	Partner Member State	Synchronous opposition	Relation to the expected
1.	***Sweden***	***2***	***Greater****
1.	United Kingdom	2	Greater
3.	Belgium	1	Greater**
3.	***Latvia***	***1***	***Greater****
3.	Germany	1	Greater*
3.	Slovenia	1	Greater*
3.	Portugal	1	Greater*
3.	***Denmark***	***1***	***Greater***
3.	Austria	1	Greater

3.	Netherlands	1	Greater
-	***Estonia***	***0***	***Smaller***
-	***Latvia***	***0***	***Smaller***
-	***Lithuania***	***0***	***Smaller***

*Significance codes: * - significant on 10% , **- significant on 5%, *** - significant on 1%.*
Note: Synchronous contestations with non-listed Member States were zero.

Table 16
Latvia, synchronous opposition, finance, period 2009-2019

Ranking	Partner Member State	Synchronous opposition	Relation to the expected
1.	Belgium	1	Greater**
1.	Czechia	1	Greater**
1.	Slovenia	1	Greater**
1.	***Finland***	***1***	***Greater****
1.	Luxembourg	1	Greater**
1.	Portugal	1	Greater**
1.	Austria	1	Greater*
1.	***Sweden***	***1***	***Greater***
1.	United Kingdom	1	Greater
-	***Denmark***	***0***	***Smaller***
-	***Estonia***	***0***	***Smaller***
-	***Lithuania***	***0***	***Smaller***

*Significance codes: * - significant on 10% , **- significant on 5%, *** - significant on 1%.*
Note: Synchronous contestations with non-listed Member States were zero.

Table 17
Sweden, synchronous opposition, finance, period 2009-2019

Ranking	Partner Member State	Synchronous opposition	Relation to the expected
1.	United Kingdom	13	Greater***
2.	Netherlands	12	Greater***
3.	Austria	5	Greater***
4.	***Denmark***	***4***	***Greater******
5.	***Finland***	***2***	***Greater****
6.	Belgium	1	Greater*
6.	***Latvia***	***1***	***Greater***
6.	Germany	1	Greater
6.	Slovenia	1	Greater
6.	Luxembourg	1	Greater
6.	Portugal	1	Greater
-	***Estonia***	***0***	***Smaller***
-	***Lithuania***	***0***	***Smaller***

*Significance codes: * - significant on 10% , **- significant on 5%, *** - significant on 1%.*
Note: Synchronous contestations with non-listed Member States were zero.

4.5 VISEGRAD GROUP

Vít Havelka

ABSTRACT

The article analyses the political cohesion of the Visegrad Group within the EU decision-making process between the years 2009–2019 by combining a quantitative analysis of voting records in the Council of the EU and qualitative discursive analysis. The study shows that there is evidence of cooperation between the V4 states; however, this does not mean that the member states would create a solid voting block at the EU level. Collaboration is primarily used as a discussion platform facilitating the EU legislative process rather than a cohesive grouping. There is also evidence of a V2+2 format, where Czechia and Slovakia, and Hungary and Poland create distinctive blocks.

Basic information

- Participating countries: Czechia, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia
- Combined GDP in total (in billion EUR, 2019): 999.16
- Combined GDP's relative share to EU28 total GDP (in %): 6.0
- Combined population in total (in million, 2019): 63.8
- Combined population's relative share to EU28 total (in %): 12.4
- Combined Council voting weights in the EU (old voting system, before 01/11/2014, in %): 16.3
- Combined Council voting weights in the EU (new voting system, after 01/11/2014, [reflecting the voting weight in 2014], in %): 12.7

Sources: Eurostat (2021a), Eurostat (2021b), Poptcheva and Devaney (2014)

INTRODUCTION

The Visegrad Group consists of four Central European countries - Czechia, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia. The cooperation was established in 1991, and its goal was to prepare the states for the accession to the European Union

and to increase their negotiation power during the enlargement process. Simultaneously, the Visegrad Group should have become a basis for regional cooperation in culture, science, transport, and other policy areas[1].

After the 2004 enlargement, one could argue that the cooperation had to redefine its purpose since the original goal, EU membership, had been achieved. The respective governments continued to cooperate on a regular basis and even held meetings before the European Council sessions. Today, the collaboration covers all the most important dossiers, such as energy policy, transport, defence, as well as foreign policy. There are regular sessions of sectoral ministerial employees, and even governments organize joint meetings. The participating countries hold a rotating presidency, which takes place from 1 July to 30 June the following year. Similarly to the presidency of the Council, the presiding countries create a working programme that covers topics of their interest and reflects other political agendas debated in the region. In general, we can consider the Visegrad group as a traditional, formalized cooperation that exceeds ad-hoc high-level political cooperation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The current academic literature focusing on the Visegrad cooperation can be categorized into three groups. Firstly, a large part of the articles reacts to the controversial approach to migration during the Schengen Crisis in 2015-16 (Nyzio 2017). In this sense, Erich Schmölz argues that the activity of the V4 stems from its position as a disadvantaged group and provocateur. The group actively takes advantage of this reputation and creates an artificial gap between the group and the rest of the EU. According to the author, this was possible due to a national collective identity revival, which could be utilized to differentiate the group from the rest of the EU (Schmölz 2019). Kalmar adopted another approach, analysing Islamophobia in CEE in the context of this phenomenon in Europe. The author argues that Islamophobia is present in the entire continent and that the Visegrad Four differs in their position as periphery, which increases the feeling of being left out. Finally, Cichocki and Jabkowski talk about the long-term impact of the Schengen crisis on migration perception in the V4 countries. The scholars argue that the uniform reaction to the issue did not have anything to do with the

1 See section „About Visegrad Group" on the official website: https://www.visegradgroup.eu/about

actual reality, and the securitization of the topic was "artificially created" in the public discourse. They conclude that the impact of the crisis on the perception of migration will be long-term and changing the discourse will be extremely difficult (Cichocki and Jabkowski 2019).

Another set of articles concentrate on energy policy in the EU and CEE region. A collective of authors examined all V4 documents on energy policy and energy security. They concluded that the topic is one of the most prominent ones in the V4. The cooperation increased after 2015, when the V4 started to harmonize its positions towards the EU energy policy. On the other hand, the V4 position tends to be reactive, especially in the realm of the EU climate policy. Simultaneously, there is very little evidence that the joint V4 positions would have any significant impact on the EU decision-making (Osička et al. 2021). In another study, the ineffectiveness of the joint energy policy is also demonstrated in the V4 inability to create a common natural gas market. The authors assert that there is a lack of understanding between the partners in terms of what an integrated market means and how it should relate to the EU common energy market (Osička et al. 2018).

There is also a study by another author collective (Törőcsik, Kácsor and Alfa 2018). analysing the state of energy security in the V4 after Poland opened its LNG terminal in Swinoujscie. The authors conclude that the region is still dependent on few suppliers, and there is a need for more infrastructure development in order to overcome the energy security threats. Finally, several studies concentrate on the energy transition to renewables. Ewelina Kochanek, for instance, examined the current state of play in V4 countries energy mix as well as decarbonization plans. The study concludes that the current transition plans are not sufficient to reach international obligations and EU targets (Kochanek 2021).

Regarding the CFSP, several articles analyze the V4 position as a group, others compare the member states' security policies with each other. Jaroslav Ušiak for example says that the security environment affects all countries in the region similarly. The author also expects that the states will face the same challenges in the future such as the Russian-Ukrainian war, nationalism/extremism, and the need to increase defence budget spending. This does not mean, however, that the states would find it easy to agree on the joint position. Strong disagreements remain in place especially concerning Russia (Ušiak 2018). Another study elaborates

the discrepancies between V4 member states policies to Russia in detail. Paďourek and Mareš argue that the Russian-Ukrainian war had a major impact on security strategies in all V4 countries except Hungary, which still does not mention Russia as a threat in its documents, but rather perceives the country as an ordinary international partner. (Paďourek and Mareš 2020). This presumption also confirms a study by Radovan Višňovský, who asserts that there is no common V4 position on Russia, but four various bilateral relations. Apart from Poland, all Visegrad states approach Russia pragmatically. Hungary is considered to be the "most pro-Russian" of all states. (Višňovský 2021). Finally, two studies concentrate on the Western Balkans and V4 activity in Bosnia-Herzegovina (Walsch 2015; Bursać and Stojanović 2020). They analysed specific foreign policy domains, where the Visegrad countries are active.

The literature review demonstrated that the V4 is a continuously studied subject. The scholars predominantly focus on various policy areas where the Visegrad Four is thought to be most active. A large portion of the literature focuses on the CFSP, energy policy and migration policy. The authors show that there is a V4 effort to cooperate closely in these areas, but particular national interests usually prevail and hinder a joint Visegrad position. A good example is the policy towards Russia, where the member states cannot reach a consensus. In this sense, the regional integration does not fulfil its expectations. Finally, there are no articles analysing the actual V4 cohesion in the EU decision-making, which is exactly the goal of this article. In this sense, it fills a research gap and provides the reader with an overview of how cohesive the V4 votes in the Council of the EU, and whether there is evidence of a closer policy alignment of the Visegrad states.

ANALYSIS OF THE VOTING RECORDS

General voting

Looking at the voting records in all Council formats, there is evidence that V4 is to a certain degree cohesive regional cooperation. Although most of the V4 countries do not have all their counterparts in top3 voting similarity (see all "voting similarity" tables in Annex), their alignment is greater than statistically expected. This does not mean, however, that the Visegrad states would be any different from the rest of the EU.

Similar voting patterns can be found in the case of other member states. Statistical analysis does not support the notion, that the V4 would be a solitaire without partners at the EU level.

The closest allies within the V4 seem to be Slovakia and Czechia. In fact, Slovakia is among the top2 countries for Czechia and these states show 96.75% similarity (see Table 1), significantly more than expected. Since Slovakia performs more consensually, Czechia is its 14th most important voting partner, however, still well above the statistically expected results. This in effect means that there is evidence for Czechia to have aligned EU policies and share a significant amount of preferences with Slovakia.

Hungary and Poland, on the other hand, showed overall lower consensual voting in the Council (see Tables 2 and 3). Whereas in the case of Czechia and Slovakia, their "closest voting partners" cast their ballot in 96% and 98% cases (see Tables 1 and 4), Hungary and Poland shared the most similar voting pattern only in around 95% and 96% of cases (see Tables 2 and 3). This means that although Hungary and Poland have their other V4 partners in the lower parts of the table, the differences between most similar voting states and the V4 countries is lower than in case of the Czechia and Slovakia. Simultaneously, the statistical analysis shows that both Hungary and Poland vote together with their other V4 partners more often than expected.

Looking at each V4 country voting partner, it seems that the Visegrad countries share a closer alignment with the voting habits of the Baltic states, Romania, Greece and Cyprus. Czechia and Slovakia are also specific in the sense that they showed more similar voting patterns with Finland (see Tables 1 and 3). Another rather surprising result is that with the exception of Poland, all V4 member states have a strong alignment with the voting of Luxembourg.

Finally, all V4 states have a very high voting similarity with France. This, however, does not mean that the Visegrad would have their policies aligned with this country. On the contrary, the voting similarity is in the case of Slovakia and Poland lower than expected (see Tables 3 and 4). The reason for this is that France very rarely opposes files in the Council and usually votes in favour of the proposals. Therefore, almost every single EU member state has France listed among the top10 voting partners.

Voting opposition in general

Regarding records of opposition voting (see all "synchronous opposition" tables in Annex), there is evidence for the V4 to build coalitions more regularly than a mere statistical prognosis would suggest. Simultaneously, all Visegrad states have their counterparts at the top10. On the other hand, one should not overlook that there is no evidence for the V4 building a solid opposition block without any partners. The V4 countries do share similar voting habits, but the same also applies to some other EU27 states. For example, Czechia opposed ten different subjects with Austria, which makes their southern neighbour the most regular opposition partner (see Table 5).

While looking at the dynamics within the Visegrad Four, there is evidence of some V2+2 dynamic within the group. Slovakia tends to oppose legislation more often with Czechia (see Table 8). Hungary and Poland recorded nine simultaneous declining votes, making them the most regular partners in the synchronous opposition (see Tables 6 and 7).

The V4 states also manifest some variation with regard to, who their bilateral opposition partners outside of the regional group are. Czechia seems to share voting habits with Luxembourg, Denmark, and Belgium (see Table 5), whereas Poland and Hungary showed similar patterns to Bulgaria (see Tables 6 and 7). Finally, all Visegrad states except for Poland have the United Kingdom among their top10 blocking partner.

The case of the United Kingdom is, however, the same as France in voting similarity. There was no other EU state that would be in opposition more than the UK. This also means that the synchronous opposition with this country was more likely than in other cases. It is still statistically relevant, but to a lesser degree than e.g., Austria in the case of Czechia.

Differences in election periods

First and foremost, our analysis shows that the decision making in the Council became less consensual in the legislation period 2014-2019. This is especially noticeable in the case of Hungary and Poland, which both increased the number of opposition votes and decreased the percentage of synchronous votes. Slovakia and Czechia remained at approximately the same levels.

As far as changes in voting patterns within the group are concerned, Czechia distanced itself from Poland (+-2 p.p) and Hungary (+-4 p.p). The voting similarity with Slovakia remained the same and the country remains the Czechs the closest voting partner in the Council. A smaller than expected voting pattern was identified among Southern EU countries such as Spain and Portugal.

Hungary manifested an increase in voting patterns similarity with Romania, Croatia, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Ireland, Estonia, and Denmark. Its closest voting partners became Bulgaria and Romania in the election period 2014-2019. A high degree of alignment is also seen with the Baltic States, Cyprus, and Slovakia. Finally, it is important to mention that Poland became Hungary's closest partner in synchronous opposition.

Poland moved statistically closer to Ireland, Denmark, and Croatia, however, only the latter also showed a high degree of voting similarity – 93.74%. Denmark and Ireland cannot be perceived as Hungary closest partners with vote similarity of 87.7% and 86.3% respectively. Slovakia seems to remain at approximately the same levels of alignment as in the 2009-2014 election period.

Finally, Slovakia significantly increased alignment with Lithuania, which has an even higher voting similarity with Slovakia than Czechia. Czechs only remain Slovaks' closest partners in synchronous opposition. Apart from these two countries, Slovakia showed similar preferences to Romania, Poland, Cyprus, Croatia and Belgium. Hungary voted only in 93,74% as Slovakia, but there is evidence of more aligned policies as Hungary tends to oppose a disproportionally high amount of legislation. If they vote in favour, they statistically join Slovakia more often than expected.

Conclusion

The statistical analysis of voting in the Council of the EU showed that there is evidence of a closer alignment of EU policies among the V4 states. Simultaneously, the Visegrad Four does not stand out as the only bilateral partner of its member states. Contrary, Visegrad countries usually show closer alignment with other EU states than with the group itself. This suggests that the EU policy coordination in the V4 should not be overestimated. The group very likely works as a discussion platform, but the V4 members do not strive to achieve unity at any cost.

Furthermore, there is evidence for the V4 becoming slightly more disharmonious in the second election period 2014-2019. Czechia especially moved away from Hungary and Poland. As far as the V2+2 dynamic is concerned, it is reasonable to say that Czechia and Slovakia show a greater EU policy alignment and the same also applies to Hungary and Poland. This, however, does not mean that the data would provide solid proof that V2+2 dynamic is present in the voting patterns – statistically, we can identify only tenuous links that might support this theory.

ANALYSIS OF THE INTERVIEWS

General characteristics

The interview analysis concentrated on several issues mentioned in the previous chapters. Firstly, all respondents consider Visegrad Four to be well-established regional cooperation that has a rich history and is implemented on more governance levels than only the highest political level. National negotiators usually know each other's positions even before there is a V4 meeting. It seems that there is a profound knowledge of V4 states policies within the group.

This, however, does not mean that the Visegrad Four would try to harmonize its positions to EU legislation in every single aspect (e.g. Interview 7). The cooperation can be described as fluid – if there is a common interest, the member states collaborate closely in the EU decision-making. As it will be elaborated later, there are several dossiers where the member states have different opinions, and finding a common ground is excessively difficult. In other areas, such as migration, there is a strong consensus on a common policy and thus the V4 creates a solid block of four EU member states (Interview 3, 7, 13, 15).

Based on the interviews, the Visegrad Four countries also split into two groups according to how close their policies are (Interview 15). There is Hungary and Poland, which tend to agree on a large variety of EU topics, and then Czechia and Slovakia who share similar views on topics such as rule of law, conditionality and "other cultural wars". This dynamic in essence means that characterization of the V4 as V2+2 corresponds with the reality in the EU negotiation process.

In general, the V4 cooperation was appreciated by all respondents. They evaluated the group as beneficial – "it is always good to talk" and "more states always have a stronger voice than if a particular position is proposed only by one government" (Interview 3, 7, 13, 15). On the other hand, there are disadvantages to being part of the V4. The group does not have a good reputation in some policy areas, such as migration for example, and it is often regarded as a group blocking new initiatives rather than proposing its own (Interview 7, 13, 15). It is unclear whether this reputation actually hampers the V4's ability to perform as an influential actor at the EU level, but the respondents were clear that negative labelling worsens their position at the negotiation table.

Looking at the concrete policy areas where the Visegrad states share similar positions, the most reoccurring answer was the migration (Interview 3, 7, 9, 13, 15. This theme was shared among all respondents, who claimed that attitudes towards the European migration and asylum policy are strongly harmonized among the group members. Some expressed that there might be a different emphasis on particular issues, but the policy essence remains very similar (Interview 15).

Cooperation in the EU27

The Visegrad member states also look for partners outside the group in the EU negotiation process. The respondents agree that EU politics is fluid and not always, it is possible to agree on one common position. It is however important to mention that the V4 countries regularly cooperate with other EU27 member states depending on the topic.

In any case, respondents specifically mentioned that the most relevant partner for all V4 states in Germany (Interview 5, 7, 15). This is no surprise due to very close economic ties and Germany's position as the biggest EU economy measured in GDP in € current prices (Interview 7). Germany also commands a strong voting power in the Council under the QMV, meaning that it must usually be part of the winning coalition.

Looking at specific partners for each Visegrad Four member state, the Polish respondents claimed that Poland prioritizes communication with its neighbouring countries, especially the Baltic States (Interview 13). According to the interviewers, the cooperation on the bilateral level is similarly strong as to other V4 states. Czechia in turn communicates with Hanseatic

League and Austria in regard to the Single Market policies (Interview 7). Both Slovakia and Czechia have similar positions to France in energy policy (Interview 7 and 15).

Policy areas

The other areas where Visegrad closely cooperates relate to the EU CFSP. All four member states agree on a common position towards the Eastern Partnership, Enlargement, and Western Balkans (Interview 5, 7, 15). One might argue that these areas are the only where the V4 can positively influence the European discourse, and even manages to set agenda. It must be stressed, though that in other issues – such as EU policy towards Russia – the Visegrad states fail to agree (Interview 15). In this sense, relations with Russia break the otherwise strong tandem of Poland and Hungary. Whereas Polish policy on Russia has always been cautious, Hungary tends to position itself as a "bridge" between Russia and the rest of the EU. Czechia and Slovakia somehow oscillate between these rather extreme positions.

With regard to diverging positions, our respondents could only agree on rule of law (Interview 13, 15). It is a policy area where the Visegrad countries build the V2+2 blocks. Hungary and Poland are opposing the current EU discourse, whereas Czechia and Slovakia try not to be involved in the discussion. On the other hand, this also points out a certain degree of cooperation. The V4 membership and close cooperation hinder Slovakia and Czechia to take a clear stance close to the European mainstream. For political reasons, they deny taking sides.

Finally, there are specifics in relation to the EU budgetary issues (Interview 7). Czechia again stands out as a solitaire. The country is the richest of all four and oscillates close to the net payer position to the EU budget. Therefore, it does not completely share the other Visegrad states appetitive for a generous EU cohesion policy.

Identity

Finally, there was no agreement between the respondents, to what extent the Visegrad Group created a common identity. Initial answers were predominantly negative, but after a closer look some respondents acknowledged that Visegrad states share similar history and experience from the Communism and post-1989 transformation, including that it is trying to present itself as

" Central Europe". One respondent, as an example, mentioned that "we are trying to have an identity of a Central European block of countries that are very closely cooperating on many issues and having a common agenda. So yes, I think that there is such an image. (...) Something close to a common identity might also be strengthened by the fact that the V4 has its own logo, visual identity and holds a rotating presidency" (Interview 13).

On the other hand, others were rather sceptical to the idea of a common identity. "We probably do not have anything like that. But we have so many contacts, we regularly communicate and know each other. So, if common identity only as a result of our frequent contacts," said interviewee 15.

That being said, we can presume that there is evidence for a common identity, although it's not entirely shared among all the respondents. It rather seems that the V4 identity is weak and it will need more time to be internalized, should the member states strive to achieve anything like this.

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ANNEX

Table 1
Czechia, voting similarity, overall voting, period 2009-2019

Ranking	Partner Member State	Vote similarity (%)	Relation to the expected
1.	France	96.84%	Greater*
2.	***Slovakia***	96.75%	Greater***
3.	Cyprus	96.56%	Greater***
3.	Lithuania	96.56%	Greater***
5.	Luxembourg	96.38%	Greater***
6.	Finland	96.29%	Greater***
7.	Greece	96.11%	Greater
8.	Latvia	96.02%	Greater***
8.	Slovenia	96.02%	Greater***
10.	Romania	95.93%	Greater***
20.	***Hungary***	93.94%	Greater***
21.	***Poland***	93.76%	Greater***

*Significance codes: * - significant on 10% , **- significant on 5%, *** - significant on 1%.*

Table 2
Hungary, voting similarity, overall voting, period 2009-2019

Ranking	Partner Member State	Vote similarity (%)	Relation to the expected
1.	Lithuania	96.20%	Greater***
2.	Cyprus	95.84%	Greater***
2.	France	95.84%	Greater
3.	Romania	95.66%	Greater***
4.	Greece	95.48%	Greater***
5.	Latvia	95.39%	Greater***
5.	***Slovakia***	95.39%	Greater***
6.	Finland	95.30%	Greater***
7.	Estonia	95.12%	Greater***
7.	Luxembourg	95.12%	Greater**
18.	***Poland***	94.03%	Greater***
19.	***Czechia***	93.94%	Greater***

*Significance codes: * - significant on 10% , **- significant on 5%, *** - significant on 1%.*

Table 3
Poland, voting similarity, overall voting, period 2009-2019

Ranking	Partner member state	Vote similarity (%)	Relation to the expected
1.	Lithuania	95.84%	Greater***
2.	Cyprus	95.66%	Greater***
3.	Romania	95.57%	Greater***
4.	Latvia	95.48%	Greater***
5.	France	95.39%	Smaller
5.	***Slovakia***	95.39%	Greater***
6.	Estonia	95.21%	Greater***
7.	Greece	95.12%	Greater**
8.	Malta	94.85%	Greater***
9.	Bulgaria	94.67%	Greater***
17.	***Hungary***	94.03%	Greater***
19.	***Czechia***	93.76%	Greater***

*Significance codes: * - significant on 10% , **- significant on 5%, *** - significant on 1%.*

Table 4
Slovakia, voting similarity, overall voting, period 2009-2019

Ranking	Partner member state	Vote similarity (%)	Relation to the expected
1.	Lithuania	98.01%	Greater***
2.	France	97.92%	Smaller
3.	Cyprus	97.83%	Greater***
4.	Estonia	97.65%	Greater***
4.	Latvia	97.65%	Greater***
6.	Romania	97.56%	Greater***
7.	Finland	97.38%	Greater***
7.	Greece	97.38%	Greater*
9.	Slovenia	97.20%	Greater***
10.	Luxembourg	97.11%	Greater**
14.	***Czechia***	96.75%	Greater***
19.	***Hungary***	95.39%	Greater***
19.	***Poland***	95.39%	Greater***

*Significance codes: * - significant on 10% , **- significant on 5%, *** - significant on 1%.*

Table 5
Czechia, synchronous opposition, overall voting, period 2009-2019

Ranking	Partner Member State	Synchronous opposition	Relation to the expected
1.	Austria	10	Greater***
2.	***Slovakia***	9	Greater***
3.	***Hungary***	6	Greater***
3.	Luxembourg	6	Greater***
3.	United Kingdom	6	Greater
6.	Belgium	5	Greater***
6.	Denmark	5	Greater***
6.	***Poland***	5	Greater**
9.	Bulgaria	4	Greater***
9.	Malta	4	Greater***

*Significance codes: * - significant on 10% , **- significant on 5%, *** - significant on 1%.*

Table 6
Hungary, synchronous opposition, overall voting, period 2009-2019

Ranking	Partner Member State	Synchronous opposition	Relation to the expected
1.	***Poland***	9	Greater***
2.	Austria	6	Greater**
2.	***Czechia***	6	Greater***
2.	United Kingdom	6	Greater
5.	Bulgaria	5	Greater***
5.	Germany	5	Greater*
5.	***Slovakia***	5	Greater***
8.	Croatia	4	Greater***
8.	Cyprus	4	Greater***
8.	Romania	4	Greater***

*Significance codes: * - significant on 10% , **- significant on 5%, *** - significant on 1%.*

Table 7
Poland, synchronous opposition, overall voting, period 2009-2019

Ranking	Partner member state	Synchronous opposition	Relation to the expected
1.	***Hungary***	9	Greater***
2.	Bulgaria	6	Greater***
2.	Malta	6	Greater***
2.	Romania	6	Greater***
2.	***Slovakia***	6	Greater***
6.	Croatia	5	Greater***
6.	Cyprus	5	Greater***
6.	***Czechia***	5	Greater**
6.	Latvia	5	Greater***
10.	Austria	4	Greater

*Significance codes: * - significant on 10% , **- significant on 5%, *** - significant on 1%.*

Table 8
Slovakia, synchronous opposition, overall voting, period 2009-2019

Ranking	Partner member state	Synchronous opposition	Relation to the expected
1.	***Czechia***	9	Greater***
2.	Belgium	6	Greater***
2.	***Poland***	6	Greater***
4.	Austria	5	Greater***
4.	***Hungary***	5	Greater***
6.	Romania	4	Greater***
7.	Estonia	3	Greater***
7.	Germany	3	Greater**
7.	Malta	3	Greater**
7.	United Kingdom	3	Greater

*Significance codes: * - significant on 10% , **- significant on 5%, *** - significant on 1%.*

4.6 WEIMAR TRIANGLE

Nikolett Garai

ABSTRACT

The Weimar Triangle (W3) is an informal, non-institutionalized consultative forum with the aim to strengthen relations between Poland, Germany, and France. It is a tool designed for consultations between the capitals with the aim to discuss mainly foreign and security policy related issues and topics concerning European affairs in a flexible manner. During the 30 years of its existence, the W3 went through different phases with varying intensity of cooperation. Divergent national interests regarding key foreign policy issues, asymmetrical power relationships among the members, the lack of political will, and preference to prioritize other consultative formats before Council meetings were among the main reasons why the W3 remains a rather marginal player in EU affairs. Voting statistics and the results of the interviews with EU officials reinforce the notion that the W3 is not a coherent minilateral group, because Member States' voting behaviours differ significantly in different policy areas. While German and French cooperation intensified over the investigated 10-year-period, Poland finds itself gradually shifting to the opposite end of German and French positions in key policy areas.

Basic information

- Participating countries: France, Germany, Poland
- Combined GDP in total (in billion EUR, 2019): 6,444.58
- Combined GDP's relative share to EU28 total GDP (in %): 39.03
- Combined population in total (in million, 2019): 188.29
- Combined population's relative share to EU28 total (in %): 36.61
- Combined Council voting weights in the EU (old voting system, before 01/11/2014, in %): 24
- Combined Council voting weights in the EU (new voting system, after 01/11/2014, [reflecting the voting weight in 2014], in %): 36.53

Sources: Eurostat (2021a), Eurostat (2021b), Poptcheva and Devaney (2014)

INTRODUCTION

The Weimar Triangle (W3) is an informal, non-institutionalized consultative forum aiming to strengthen relations between Poland, Germany, and France and to exchange views on mutually important issues. The W3 was established in 1991, when Hans-Dietrich Genscher, Roland Krzysztof Skubiszewski and Roland Dumas, the constituting countries' foreign ministers, signed the *"Joint Statement on Foreign Ministers of France, Poland, and Germany on the Future of Europe"* in Weimar (Federal Foreign Office of Germany 2020a). Originally, the W3 was intended to have a bridge-building function, connecting the two major Western European economies with the largest post-communist country in the East Central European (ECE) region to promote European values.

During the last 30 years, the W3 developed its framework for a cooperation taking place on multiple levels between governments. This cooperation takes place irregularly across a broad range of topics from high to low politics. Therefore the level of institutionalisation is very low because no permanent institutions were created and consultative mechanisms are at the core of activities. Issues including strategic questions on foreign and security policy as well as EU affairs are discussed at summits of the heads of states or at the meetings of foreign ministers, while certain specific issues are consulted on between national parliaments. Presidents or specific committees of the national parliaments also sometimes convene. For example, the EU committees of national parliaments have met regularly since 2000 (Müller 2019).

The W3 has always been a rather symbolic form of cooperation with few remarkable results. Therefore, this informal framework of cooperation received a lot of criticism. One heavily emphasised argument in academic literature is that the W3 was not able to serve as a flexible tool of coordination around important EU topics. Therefore, it did not succeed in emerging as a leading minilateral group in EU politics (Lang and Schwarzer 2011; Janning 2016; Koopman 2016; Jurczyszyn and Wissman 2020). As Czasak (2018, 187) has noted, the three countries each represent different regional interests "that can be discussed from various perspectives." Here lies a huge challenge that makes the job of the W3 quite difficult.

While civil and cultural exchange has developed successfully between the three countries, joint actions regarding foreign and security policy matters have been rather periodic. There are several factors that have hindered

fruitful cooperation. We argue that divergent national interests regarding key foreign policy issues, asymmetrical power relationships among members, a lack of political will, and preference to prioritize other minilateral groupings have been among the main reasons why the W3 have become a marginal player in EU affairs despite the initial enthusiasm in the early 1990's.

Nevertheless, the United Kingdom's withdrawal from the EU gave rise to hopes that the W3 could serve as a revived driving force in the discussion on the future of European integration (Kulpa, 2020). As it will be pointed out later in this analysis, even the participating members' perceptions of theW3's purpose are not unified. Two things are clear from the interviews we conducted with German, French and Polish EU officials: Firstly, the W3 is a tool designed for consultations between the capitals outside of the "Brussels bubble". Secondly, there is currently no will to transform the W3 into a permanent consultative platform before Council meetings because other formats serve these purposes well for all three countries.

30 YEARS OF THE WEIMAR TRIANGLE

To understand why the W3 is still regarded an important format, we must look back in history. When it was first established, original aim of the grouping was to create a platform for discussion both on the improvement of cross-border regional cooperation and on the future direction of Europe (Federal Foreign Office of Germany 2020a). Another additional objective was to assist Poland's integration into the Euro-Atlantic political and security structures after the collapse of the Soviet Union. On one hand, establishing relations with Germany and France was a key foreign policy priority for Poland at that time right after the country started its democratic transition (Czasak 2018). On the other hand, the establishment of W3 was a good opportunity to consolidate the position of France towards Germany and Poland as well. After the German reunification in 1990, France had reservations regarding Germany's possible aspirations to become a leader of the European integration, while at the same time France was also cautious towards the ECE countries and supported deeper integration of the existing European Community before a possible enlargement would take place. The establishment of the W3 was therefore an avenue for France to oversee the actions of Germany in the ECE region, a symbol of the reconciliation of German-Polish relations, and finally an important step for Poland on the path of European integration (ibid.). In the initial phase of the W3, the main goal was to support Poland's aspirations

to join the NATO, the Western European Union, and ultimately the European Community. In 1994, consultations at the level of defence ministers took place three times which indicated that both Berlin and Paris committed themselves to pave the way for Poland (Czasak 2018). During the 30 years of its existence, the W3 went through different phases with varying intensity (Koopman 2016).

By assessing the success of the W3's establishment in the 2000's, we can conclude that its results were mixed at best. One occasion on which divergent interests of Germany, France and Poland were very visible and the W3 failed to act coherently was the question of support of the US military action in Iraq in 2003. While Germany and France opposed US involvement, Poland supported it (Kulpa 2020). This was a direct consequence of the three countries' different security perceptions. Due to geopolitical reasons, Poland sees NATO as a guarantee of its own security and has a special relationship with the US. France, in the meantime, focuses on the development of European security capabilities. Germany takes the middle ground as it supports both NATO activities as well as European initiatives like PESCO (Heurtaux, Tulmets and Zerka 2020).

Because of the development of differing visions regarding how the future EU should look like among the participants, the importance of the platform gradually shrunk . Cooperation became more and more loose; meetings were organised on a more irregular basis, as the interests of the three parties became increasingly divergent. The current state of cooperation is well-illustrated by the fact that the last summit of the respective heads of state was held in 2011.

The quality of bilateral relations determines the efficacy and proper functioning of the W3 as a minilateral group. Therefore, cooperation always depends on current political processes. While the Franco-German axis can be considered as traditionally one of the main drivers of EU integration, Franco-Polish and German-Polish relations faced several challenges since 2015 (Jurczyszyn and Wissman 2020).

Many issues contributed to the deterioration of German-Polish relations. One contentious issue was the debate over German reparations for the occupation of Poland during the National Socialist occupation, which was introduced into public discourse by the Polish government in 2017 (Schweiger 2020). Different views on the management of the migration crisis, rule of law issues, Nord Stream 2 and the adoption of the EU budget further increased the distance between Germany and Poland (ibid.).

On the other side of the triangle, Polish-French relations are also burdened. In one of their analyses, Heurtaux, Tulmets and Zerka (2020, 3) wrote that "Franco-Polish relations are generally considered to be the underperforming part of the Weimar Triangle." While Franco-Polish relations were historically less conflictual than the German-Polish or Franco-German, political, economic and strategic disagreements surfaced between Paris and Warsaw in the last couple of years (ibid.). Diplomatic relations suffered a hit when Warsaw backed out of the purchase of 50 Airbus Caracal multi-role helicopters in 2016, which in turn caused the cancellation of the Polish visit by the French president (France24 2016). President Emanuel Macron's La République En Marche (LREM) and Jarosław Kaczyński's Prawo i Sprawiedliwość (PiS) are on opposing sides in many strategic issues like for example the role of nation states in the EU, questions of sovereignty, the future development of the single market, European security capabilities or the issue of posted workers (Heurtaux, Tulmets and Zerka 2020). In the realm of foreign policy, Poland supports Western Balkan enlargement as well as Ukraine's path to the EU. France on the other hand poses a major obstacle to both these two processes (Kulpa 2020). Paris would prefer a new status quo with Russia, which according to Płóciennik (2020) is "partly due to France's prioritisation of Europe's southern neighbourhood and the threat of terrorism." Meanwhile, Germany takes a more reserved stance towards Russia, but is also in favour of dialogue. The joint efforts of Merkel and Macron culminated in a call for an EU-Russia summit in June 2021. This was, however, severely opposed by Poland and the Baltic states (Emmott, Strupczewski and Strauss 2021).

Nonetheless, the balance sheet of the Weimar Triangle shows positive developments as well. The establishment of the Weimar Battlegroup, which was deployed first in 2013, was considered a success story (Koopman 2016). Another issue that brought the Weimar countries together was the Ukrainian crisis, during which they tried to act as a crisis manager (ibid.). Foreign ministers met in Kyiv in 2014 with the aim of brokering a deal between President Victor Yanukovych and the opposition. This effort resulted in an agreement on the settlement of the crisis (German Federal Foreign Office 2014).

More recently there are signs of revitalisation of the activities of the W3. This can be traced back to the new geopolitical and security challenges in Europe that were caused by Brexit, the deterioration of transatlantic relations under Donald Trump's presidency in the US and the gradually emerging Sino-American strategic confrontation. With the UK's departure from the EU,

Poland's weight within the community increased. As Heurtaux, Tulmets and Zenka (2020, 21) note, "an effective European foreign policy cannot exist if a country such as Poland is bypassed." Moreover, president Macron tried to increase France's room for manoeuvre before the MFF negotiations (ibid.).

In 2019, W3 ministers of agriculture released a declaration on the reform of CAP, scientific and research cooperation for implementing new technologies in agriculture and the effects of Brexit on the market of agricultural products (Joint Declaration of the Ministers of Agriculture 2019). European ministers met in Lens in January 2020 to address issues concerning climate change and the European Green Deal (Ministère de l'Europe et des Affaires Étrangères 2020). In August 2020, Berlin, Paris and Warsaw issued a joint statement regarding the situation in Belarus after the presidential elections. (Federal Foreign Office 2020b). This was followed by another joint statement of foreign ministers in October 2020, which touched upon a wide range of foreign and security issues like the Belarus situation, the recurring conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia, the importance of the Eastern Partnership, EU relations towards Russia, Ukraine, Turkey and Lybia, the EU-China relationship, the European strategy for the Indo-Pacific, the MFF 2021-2027 and the Recovery Plan, and the fight against COVID-19 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Republic of Poland 2020).

ANALYSIS OF THE VOTING RECORDS

In this section, the voting behaviour of France, Germany, and Poland will be analysed. We are going to investigate the voting similarity between the three countries during the period of 2009-2019 in different Council configurations, and identify patterns in their voting behaviour. Furthermore, we are going to show in which policy areas the three countries cooperate with each other according to the voting data. Finally, instances of synchronous oppositions will be highlighted as well.

Firstly, there is a striking difference in the behaviour of casting non-supporting votes. France tends to vote in favour of ordinary legislative proposals that reach voting procedure. Out of 675 votes in different Council configurations between 2009 and 2014, France cast only one vote against a proposal, namely the proposal on definition, description, presentation, labelling and protection of geographical indications of aromatised wine products (2011/0231 COD); and abstained only once, regarding a proposal regarding an amendment to the directive on honey (2012/0260 COD) (IFAT 2021). Out of 431 votes held between

2014 and 2019, France abstained only once in the case of a proposal regarding conditions for placing seal products on the market. (2015/0028 COD) This means that France favours the culture of compromise in EU decision-making processes; however, it is willing to cast non-supportive votes when it comes to agricultural issues.

On the other hand, Germany and Poland behaved radically different in the observed periods as the number of their non-supporting votes are much higher than those by France. Between 2009 and 2014, Germany cast 19 "against" votes and opted for 18 abstentions. The highest number of negative votes by Germany was cast in the policy area of tourism and transport (5), employment and social affairs (4), and environment and public health (4). In the following political cycle, between 2014 and 2019, the behaviour of Germany started to converge towards the French pattern, with the number of both negative votes and abstentions decreasing (6 "against" votes and 6 abstentions). We can assume that during the second observed period, German voting behaviour became less confronting, as the Franco-German axis tried to revitalise European integration.

Polish voting behaviour lies in the middle between France and Germany in terms of the number of non-supportive votes. Between 2009-2014, Poland cast 8 "against" votes and 13 abstentions. Oppositions and abstentions were concentrated in the policy area of environment and health (5 against, 3 abstentions), followed by justice and home affairs (2 against, 1 abstention). Non-supportive votes remained on the same level duringthe next political cycle as well, as Poland cast 8 "against" votes, 14 abstentions and did not participate at all in 3 cases. The highest number of oppositions and abstentions was recorded again in the policy area of environment and health (3 against, 4 abstentions), however, transport and tourism became an area in which Poland abstained 6 times during both periods.

In this section, the voting similarity between the three countries will be studied. It is important to note that similarity could either be the result of actual coordination between Member States or just random coincidence. For the theoretical background of calculating voting similarity see chapter 3: Methodology, for the explanation of the connection between non-supportive votes and voting similarity see Chapter 4.2: E3.

Results of W3 countries' voting similarity are shown in Table 1-3 in the Annex. During the period of 2009-2019, France cast 3 non-supportive votes out of a total of 1106 cast votes. For Germany, the number is 54, while Poland comes

in at 48 (IFAT 2021). The overall vote similarity for France during the period of 2009-2019 is the highest with Lithuania (99.01%), followed by Cyprus (98.92%), and Finland (98.73%) (Table 1). Poland ranks only 21st and Germany 24th in vote similarity with France. Only the value of Finland is higher than expected under the null hypothesis of randomly cast votes.

In case of Germany, the highest vote similarity shows up with France (94.85%), Cyprus (94.58%), and Lithuania (94.39%), while Poland ranks only 23rd. Similarity with France and Lithuania is still lower than expected, while in the case of Cyprus it is actually higher (Table 2). Poland's first three partners in overall vote similarity are Lithuania (95.84%), Cyprus (95.66%), and Romania (95.57%) (Table 3). The permutation test suggests that all three values are higher than expected and are significant on the level of 1%, which means that we can reject the null hypothesis with a 99% certainty. Regarding the other two W3 member states, France comes in 5th, while Germany is only 24th in terms of voting similarity towards Poland. One interesting observation is that for all three Weimar countries, Ireland, Denmark, and the UK score the lowest values, which means that these countries vote least similarly to the W3 countries in general.

If we compare the vote similarity patterns of the two observed periods to each other, we can conclude that above all, French and German positions came closer to each other. In the first period, Germany was only the 24th most similarly voting partner for France, while in the second period it moved to 20th place. Moreover, in the case of Germany, France moved from third to first place. While German and French positions became closer to each other, Poland moved further away from both Germany and France during the second observed period. As it was highlighted in the introductory part of the analysis, divergent national interests became more apparent within the group after the conservative PiS-led government took office in Poland in 2015. On the other hand, Emanuel Macron's victory in the French presidential elections in 2017 revitalised the Franco-German axis.

By taking a closer look at individual policy areas, the lowest vote similarity (72.97%) can be observed between Germany and Poland regarding employment and social issues. Wage competition, for example, is a particular issue in which Poland's positions differ significantly from the German and French ones (Płóciennik 2020). Out of the 28 Member States, Poland is the farthest from French (82.11%) and German (77.89%)

voting behaviour regarding the policy area of environment and health. Justice and home affairs is another topic, in which Poland falls into the second half of the vote similarity ranking towards Germany and France. By comparing the results of the two observed periods, we can see that the gap between French and Polish, as well as between German and Polish positions in the field of JHA widened during the second period, while German and French positions converged. In case of telecommunications and transport, Germany and Poland find themselves on the opposite end of the French voting behaviour. Voting data reveals that in case of agricultural issues, vote similarity between France and Germany decreased from 91.91% to 88.46% from the first to the second political cycle. At the same time, voting similarity in the same policy area between Poland and France increased, while Polish and German positions became more divergent.

According to the literature review and the individual interviews with representatives of the three countries, foreign and security policy issues are the main domains of cooperation for the W3. Voting data in the policy area of foreign affairs suggests a 100% similarity of the votes of the W3 countries in both periods. At first this seems t to prove our point, however we have to take into account that foreign policy issues are decided with unanimity which means that if there is a chance that the vote will not pass, it will simply be postponed until a consensus among member states is reached. Therefore, voting data in the Council cannot tell us much about the contentious issues that were highlighted in the previous section, like relations towards Russia, China, or the further enlargement of the EU.

When it comes to synchronous opposition, our hypothesis about divergent interests is reinforced once again. There is no instance of the W3 countries together opposing a proposal in the Council, nor is there any case when Germany and France or Poland and France contested together during the 10 years of observation. Interestingly though, there are 4 instances when Germany and Poland synchronously cast a non-supportive vote. However, there is only one case when both countries voted against a proposal (IFAT 2021). This was the proposal on the fight against fraud to the Union's financial interests by means of criminal law (2012/0193(COD)). Besides Poland and Germany, Cyprus, Hungary, Ireland, and Malta also voted against this OLP. Germany cast the highest number of synchronous non-supporting votes with Austria (10 times), while Poland and Hungary opposed/abstained together for a total of 9 times during the two investigated periods. Furthermore, it becomes very

visible from the statistics that Poland tends to vote in line with other ECE region countries. Polish synchronous non-supportive votes were cast together with Slovakia, Romania, Bulgaria, and Malta for 6 times each, 5 times with Czechia and Croatia.

Taking the above-mentioned tendencies into consideration, the key takeaway from the voting statistics is that we cannot talk about the W3 as a coherent minilateral group since Member States' voting behaviours differ significantly in different policy areas. While overall German and French cooperation intensified in the investigated 10 years, the voting statistics confirms that Poland finds itself gradually on the opposite end of German and French positions in key policy areas.

ANALYSIS OF THE INTERVIEWS

In this section, the results of the interviews we conducted with EU representatives of Germany, France, and Poland, are going to be cross-checked with the voting data regarding two variables: topics of cooperation, and key partners. The regularity of meetings, certain in-group dynamics and the group's identity were also selected as variables for the interviews. The questions we asked from the officials touched upon these three additional aspects as well.

Regarding the level of regularity of the trilateral meetings, all three representatives confirmed it to be very low, as there are no regular coordination activities before COREPER meetings nor before Council meetings that take place on the level of heads of state or government (Interviews 8, 13, 16). According to the Polish and German interviewees, instead of the W3, the Big Five or Big Six format is the most common configuration in which all three countries are simultaneously present, if coordination occurs before Council meetings at all (Interviews 8, 13).

A French representative shone further light on the issue by claiming that it is a common misperception to think that the W3 format is designed for permanent consultation before the above-mentioned meetings. Rather, it acts as a tool for the three countries' leaders to discuss important issues on different governmental levels when necessary (Interview 16). Our assumption of divergent positions on key issues and the lack of political will having led to the decrease of regularity of W3 meetings among the three capitals was confirmed by officials as well. According to a French representative, this also was the reason why the group's last summit of heads of state was held in 2011 (Interview 16).

When we asked the representatives about like-mindedness and most contacted partners of each country, three characteristics became visible. Firstly, the notion that cooperation is extremely flexible, and that coalitions are increasingly fluid and elusive in EU decision-making structures, was reinforced by all three representatives (Interviews 8, 13, 16). This means that cooperation depends rather on specific dossiers and files than on a pre-established minilateral group membership. The French representative for example pointed out that France wants "to be pragmatic and thematically oriented" (Interview 16).

Secondly, Member States that hold the presidency of the Council of the EU (Interviews 8, 16), and countries which are part of the trio presidencies are considered important partners to cooperate with, regardless of like-mindedness (Interviews 8, 16). Therefore, cooperation is not just issue-based, but depends on institutional mechanisms as well.

Thirdly, interpersonal relations also play a key role in coalition building. Polish and French officials strongly emphasised that personal relations among representatives and decision-makers very much determine the quality of cooperation among different countries and groups (Interviews 13, 16). However, personal ambitions of officials also play a role in developing common positions or to broker joint declarations on a specific issue held dear by a representative (Interview 8).

Regarding in-group dynamics within the W3, the Franco-German tandem is regarded as the most important partnership by both Germany and France. (Interviews 8, 16). If we compare the statements of the German official with the voting statistics, we can confirm that the closest partner for Germany is France, both in the W3 and outside of it as well. Between 2009-2019, the overall voting similarity between the two countries is 94.85% (IFAT 2021). Austria and the Netherlands were mentioned as top partners of Germany outside of the W3 (Interview 8). Here, we can see a slight discrepancy between the voting data and the interviews because, according to the statistics, Austria is only on 21st place in the overall voting similarity ranking between 2009 and 2019, while the Netherlands scored 24th (IFAT 2021).

However, when it comes to synchronous opposition, Austria is Germany's most obvious partner with 10 such instances, whereas the Netherlands only 2 times cast a non-supportive vote synchronously (IFAT 2021). Regarding individual policy areas, Austria tops the ranking on vote similarity with Germany in case of agriculture, energy, industry, research and space, and

telecommunications and transport. When it comes to internal market and consumer affairs however, Austria comes in last. In case of the policy area of finances, Austria, together with Denmark, the Netherlands and Sweden, a constellation often called the "Frugal Four", is again on the opposite side of the German position.

For Poland, the first choice of partner within the W3 is Germany. As a Polish official phrased it, Polish positions are closer to Germany than to France (Interview 13). Furthermore, when asked about the reasons why Germany is closer to Poland, the Polish official stated that „[e]ven if they [Germans] are very critical about what is happening in Poland in the last six years, they are also very inclusive towards Poland. They try to include Poland in order to make it seem that everything is okay and build sustained relationships." (Interview 13).

When it comes to relations with France, perceptions, and stereotypes about each other strongly influence the cooperation. A French representative claimed that "[...] because we are a bit further away [geographically], they [the Poles] think that we are less interested in them, [...] we have always worked a lot to try to engage the Poles" (Interview 16). On the other hand, the Polish side believes that France has always been reluctant towards the W3 as France perceived this format as a tool of Germany to rebalance French power. Therefore, Poles are under the perception that the W3 has rather been a burden for France (Interview 13).

Outside of the Weimar Triangle, Hungary and other V4 member countries were listed as the closest partners of Poland (Interview 13). It is true that Poland and Hungary cast 9 non-supportive votes together during the observed period, yet V4 countries only rank in the middle section of voting similarity for Poland while Lithuania, Cyprus and Romania top the list as its three most similarly voting countries (IFAT 2021).

The next section of our questionnaire to the representatives referred to the issue of cooperation. Officials from all three countries claimed that foreign policy and common security and defence policy (CFSP/CSDP) issues were the primary areas of cooperation. Even though there are different perceptions towards matters of security, a German official disclosed that "with a view to Russia, it's very important to always consider the Polish views on this particular issue" (Interview 8). Despite the strong emphasis on foreign and security policy, other issues can be discussed in the W3 format as well if one of the countries comes up with an initiative. The French official pointed out

a case where the W3 issued a joint declaration regarding fisheries (Interview 16). Additionally, the French official noted that "we try to talk about internal issues as well now, internal policies" (Interview 16). Furthermore, the French perspective is that Paris and Warsaw could intensify cooperation in the field of nuclear and energy issues, agriculture, and CAP (Interview 16).

On the question of whether there is a common identity of the W3, we can conclude that based on the interviews, there is no such thing as a strong group identity connecting them. However, representatives' opinions omn the reasons behind this lack of a common identity differ slightly. A French official argued that the reason for not having a distinct W3 identity is that all participating Member States have their own strong national identities that dominate trilateral relations. For France, coordination within the framework of minilateral groups is just one element of the pragmatic toolbox of coalition building. Therefore, the W3 does not need to have a separate identity to function (Interview 16). A German official, on the other hand, identified some elements that could be part of a shared identity, stating that Germany, France and Warsaw share some common traits like similar size of territory and population. They also share some historical experiences that made reconciliation and bridging in a format like the W3 a necessity to overcome differences of the past (Interview 8). The Polish official had the most sceptical view regarding group identity, claiming there was no such thing (Interview 13). However, one Polish official mentioned that the uniting force of W3 members is that all three countries share the responsibility to represent different regions and opinions within the EU and to keep the balance among different groups (Interview 13).

Lastly, there is one more observation that deserves some attention. It becomes very visible from the collected statements that all three countries approach the W3 in a different way. They have certain perceptions about each other's intentions which can sometimes be an obstacle to cooperation, especially in the Franco-Polish relation.

As it was already mentioned earlier, Poland believes that for France, maintaining good Franco-Polish relations and cooperation within the W3 format are of secondary importance. The French side, however, believes that the primary function of the W3 is to keep the very complex German-Polish bilateral relations on track, and therefore see themselves as mediators between Germany and Poland in this trilateral format. As a French official put it, "the presence of the French can bring some political space to ease out

the climate and to be able to go frankly and in depth into the issues where [...] we may not agree initially" (Interview 16). Meanwhile, the Polish interviewee indicated that for Warsaw, it seemed that it was France who was reluctant towards the W3 during the last couple of years. Rebuilding French influence in the East and strengthening Europe's strategic autonomy in the light of Brexit and Donald Trump's presidency in the US were the two reasons why France tried to revitalise the W3 according of the Polish official, who also claimed that "the Germans never had a problem with the Weimar Triangle" (Interview13).

To sum it up, the results of the interviews confirm our assumption that the W3 is rather a loose alliance between the three countries' capitals. Berlin, Paris, and Warsaw meet on an irregular basis without so much as considering consultation and coordination before COREPER and Council meetings. We can conclude that, because of different perceptions of its role as well as divergent national interests regarding key European issues, the W3 cannot be regarded as an effective minilateral group.

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ANNEX

Table 1
France, voting similarity, overall voting, period 2009-2019

Ranking	Partner Member State	Vote similarity	Relation to the expected
1.	Lithuania	99.01%	Smaller
2.	Cyprus	98.92%	Smaller
3.	Finland	98.73%	Greater**
3.	Greece	98.73%	Smaller
5.	Luxembourg	98.46%	Greater*
6.	Estonia	98.37%	Greater**
6.	Slovenia	98.37%	Smaller
8.	Latvia	98.28%	Smaller
9.	Romania	98.19%	Smaller
10.	Portugal	98.10%	Smaller
21.	***Poland***	***95.39%***	***Smaller***
24.	***Germany***	***94.85%***	***Smaller***

*Significance codes: * - significant on 10% , **- significant on 5%, *** - significant on 1%.*

Table 2
Germany, voting similarity, overall voting, period 2009-2019

Ranking	Partner Member State	Vote similarity	Relation to the expected
1.	***France***	***94.85%***	***Smaller***
2.	Cyprus	94.58%	Greater*
3.	Lithuania	94.39%	Smaller
4.	Finland	94.21%	Greater
5.	Croatia	94.14%	Greater
6.	Greece	94.12%	Smaller
6.	Latvia	94.12%	Greater**
8.	Slovenia	94.03%	Greater
9.	Estonia	93.94%	Greater*
9.	Luxembourg	93.94%	Greater
23.	***Poland***	***91.26%***	***Greater***

*Significance codes: * - significant on 10% , **- significant on 5%, *** - significant on 1%.*

Table 3
Poland, voting similarity, overall voting, period 2009-2019

Ranking	Partner Member State	Vote similarity	Relation to the expected
1.	Lithuania	95.84%	Greater***
2.	Cyprus	95.66%	Greater***
3.	Romania	95.57%	Greater***
4.	Latvia	95.48%	Greater***
5.	***France***	***95.39%***	***Smaller***
5.	Slovakia	95.39%	Greater***
6.	Estonia	95.21%	Greater***
7.	Greece	95.12%	Greater**
8.	Malta	94.85%	Greater***
9.	Bulgaria	94.67%	Greater***

*Significance codes: * - significant on 10% , **- significant on 5%, *** - significant on 1%.*

Table 4
France, common blocking attempts, overall voting, period 2009-2019

Ranking	Partner Member State	Synchronous opposition	Relation to the expected
1.	Czechia	1	Greater
1.	Denmark	1	Greater*
1.	Estonia	1	Greater**
1.	Finland	1	Greater**
1.	Hungary	1	Greater
1.	Luxembourg	1	Greater*
1.	Sweden	1	Greater*

-	-	-	-
2.	***Poland***	***0***	***Smaller***
2.	***Germany***	***0***	***Smaller***

*Significance codes: * - significant on 10% , **- significant on 5%, *** - significant on 1%.*

Table 5

Germany, common blocking attempts, overall voting, period 2009-2019

Ranking	Partner Member State	Synchronous opposition	Relation to the expected
1.	Austria	10	Greater***
2.	United Kingdom	*6*	*Smaller*
3.	Hungary	5	Greater*
4.	Bulgaria	4	Greater**
4.	***Poland***	***4***	***Greater***
5.	Denmark	3	Greater
5.	Estonia	3	Greater**
5.	Ireland	3	Greater*
5.	Latvia	3	Greater**
5.	Slovakia	3	Greater**
8.	***France***	***0***	***Smaller***

*Significance codes: * - significant on 10% , **- significant on 5%, *** - significant on 1%.*

Table 6

Poland, common blocking attempts, overall voting, period 2009-2019

Ranking	Partner Member State	Synchronous opposition	Relation to the expected
1.	Hungary	9	Greater***
2.	Romania	6	Greater***
2.	Slovakia	6	Greater***
2.	Malta	6	Greater***
2.	Bulgaria	6	Greater***
3.	Cyprus	5	Greater***
3.	Latvia	5	Greater***
3.	Croatia	5	Greater***
3.	Czechia	5	Greater**
4.	Austria	4	Greater
4.	***Germany***	***4***	***Greater***
8.	***France***	***0***	***Smaller***

*Significance codes: * - significant on 10% , **- significant on 5%, *** - significant on 1%.*

5. CONCLUSIONS

Tamás Levente Molnár

This chapter presents the findings of our analysis of the voting records and our interviews with national officials. First, we compare the theses of the theoretical framework with our interviewees' responses concerning minilateralism and minilateral groups, to find out to what degree the theoretical considerations and the practical views overlap. Second, we come to the main focus of the research, i.e. the internal cohesion, group dynamics and voting behaviour of the selected minilateral groups in the Council of the EU. We define the level of cohesion within each minilateral group based on the voting records, and we trace the internal group dynamics and the cooperation of group members with other Member States outside their group. Third, we summarize the results of the quantitative analysis and compare the results retrieved from the voting data of the six minilateral formats with each other.

We then present our findings from the interviews. Since in the literature review we argued for Brexit having an impact on expediting the block-building nature of European politics, its effects are analysed based on national officials' assessment. Fifth, we investigate whether the minilateral groups in question share a common group identity, and what language or languages the representatives of minilateral groups use in practice.

Sixth, as there are strong opinions about the Visegrad Group among national diplomats, we present the various external perceptions of the V4. Finally, we describe how minilateral formats function in practice in the European decision-making process, focusing on the Council of the EU.

THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Lang and von Ondarza define minilateralism as a "coalition of three or more EU countries that either exchange views on European policy issues at governmental level with a certain degree of stability and agree on common positions or implement cooperation projects" (Lang and von Ondarza 2018, 2). However, our interviews suggest that there is no common understanding of minilateralism among EU national diplomats.

One of the most common responses we received resembles Moisés Naím's use of the concept of minilateral group, that it is the "smallest possible number of countries needed to have the largest possible impact on solving a particular problem" (Naím 2009) (Interview 1, 6, 7, 8, 10). The second most popular definition, a more practical approach, describes minilateralism as a way Member States do European politics in Brussels (Interview 6, 13, 14, 15). Less commonly the term is used as a subgroup of a group (Interview 3), which corresponds to the verbatim description of the term *per definitionem.* In some cases, the interviewees have not heard about the definition at all (Interview 6, 12, 13), or they suggested the use of a different term instead, such as "plurilateralism" (Interview 16).

There is also disagreement among the interviewed national diplomats whether minilateral groups are formal, structured, well-organized formats (Interview 2, 3, 12), or informal entities (Interview 1, 14).

As to the functions and the subsequent advantages and disadvantages of minilateral groups, Lang and von Ondarza provide a detailed list in their theoretical framework. Based on their findings, minilateral groups contribute to the early detection of different Member States' positions, they function as a power multiplier tool for their members, they can have an added value for the EU as a whole due to their specialization and priority setting in different policy issues, and they also have a bridging function, offering an informal channel, and they at least offer the option for their group members to communicate with other countries. At the same time, they can contribute to the marginalization and fragmentation of the EU and could strengthen the informal nature of politics in general, which could lead to less transparency in political processes (Lang and von Ondarza 2018).

While we observed considerable differences regarding the various concepts of minilateralism and minilateral groups in national officials' responses, the opposite is true when it comes to the function of these. The most important function of minilateral groups, based on the interviews, is the ability for participating members to have coordination on their positions and exchange their views on different issues (Interview 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 14, 15, 16 17). Minilateral groups are also useful power multiplier tools, which provide their members, especially if they are small or medium-sized countries, with greater leverage during negotiations (Interview 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 13, 14, 16). Minilateral formats can

have a branding or trademark function as well – both in a positive and in a negative sense – when non-members associate a certain element, be it a view on a particular policy, a piece of legislation or file, a negotiation style, or a general outlook towards European integration with a specific group (Interview 3, 7, 13, 15). One national official also mentioned the ability to precook decisions, as they provide a foresight into how a number of groups will react or behave on a certain topic (Interview 4). Another referred to the legitimacy function of these groups, meaning that larger Member States could use the formats to increase their legitimacy and lower the concerns of other Member States (Interview 1).

According to the national diplomats, the possible advantages and disadvantages of minilateral groups go hand in hand (Interview 3, 4): the outcome depends on how the formats are used in practice, i.e. whether they function productively for the Union as a whole or not. The main advantages for the group members are better internal coordination on the different positions (Interview 1, 7, 8, 10, 12, 14, 15, 17), derived from the group's functionality, the ability to test national ideas in the group before presenting them to the EU27/28 (Interview 3, 4, 6, 11), and, again derived from the functionality element, having greater leverage as a group (Interview 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 13, 14, 16). For the EU, minilateral groups can contribute to better EU decision-making by filtering the decision-making process and by preserving the agreed EU language (Interview 1, 3), they can precook decisions for the EU (Interview 4), and in some cases, they are able to stop certain policy directions that are not making sense (Interview 10).

As to the downsides for group members, they have to make compromises to get their idea through the group (Interview 6, 9), non-members who have a similar position to that of a certain group can feel excluded if they are not involved (Interview 11), group membership can become a burden if members are forced into taking a position they may not feel their own (Interview 5, 15), and groups can have negative branding, which may result in an unfavourable judgement of its members by non-members (Interview 7, 13, 15). As for the disadvantages for the EU, the argument most frequently mentioned was that minilateral groups can create polarization and cleavages within the EU, undermining European unity (Interview 1, 4, 6, 8, 10, 12, 14). Minilateral formats can also entrench positions within the EU, thus their political inertia can easily lead to inflexibility and rigidity within the Union (Interview 1, 2, 3, 13, 15).

To sum up, our findings suggest that the greatest advantage of minilateral formats is having enhanced opportunity for coordination and cooperation with group members, Member States having greater leverage during negotiations, and contributing to EU decision-making by early detection of problems and issues, and preserving the agreed EU language. Among the disadvantages the most commonly named negative aspects are negative branding, the groups' potential to undermine European unity, and their ability to create inflexibility and block the EU's decision-making processes.

These results lead to three conclusions. First, we can confirm the validity of Lang and von Ondarza's definition of minilateralism, as in the case of every examined group we can observe an exchange of views on European policy issues at a governmental level, agreeing on common positions and implementing cooperation projects. Thus, all six groups in our research can be defined as minilateral groups. Second, there are significant differences between the theoretical framework and the practical perceptions of the interviewees when it comes to defining minilateralism and minilateral groups. However, theory and practice show high-level alignment in terms of determining the function of minilateral groups as well as their advantages and disadvantages.

MINILATERALISM IN THE EU – INTERNAL COHESION AND GROUP DYNAMICS

The aim of the study was to investigate the internal cohesiveness of the six selected minilateral EU groups based on the member countries' voting behaviours in the Council of the EU. The internal cohesiveness among group members was determined based on three elements: vote similarity, synchronous opposition, and level of coordination based on the permutation test.

Concerning internal cohesion, our findings suggest two things: in every examined group internal cohesion has strong limitations and depends largely on the level of the institutionalization of the respective group. Among the six formats, the most institutionalized one is Benelux, followed by the Visegrad Group, both of which can be considered formal groups. The four other groups have a more informal character: the NB6 can be seen as the most established group, with parliamentary cooperation between the Nordic Council and the Baltic Assembly, both in the context of the NB8, a broader minilateral format, while the remaining three, E3, MED7, and W3, are all ad hoc, non-institutionalized, and consultative groups.

In the case of the Benelux and Visegrad Groups, there is a higher level of cohesion among group members than among the four other groups. Regarding the overall voting data from both periods, in Benelux we can observe that the members are not each other's most common voting partners, either in terms of vote similarity or synchronous opposition (see chapter 4.1). However, the permutation test suggests that there is a high level of cooperation between the countries, as all three values are higher than expected and are significant at the 1% level, meaning that we can reject the null hypothesis with a 99% certainty. The Belgian–Luxembourg and the Dutch–Luxembourg bilateral synchronous opposition results show lower levels of significance, but both are greater than expected under the null hypothesis of random contingencies. As for the V4, there is evidence of a closer alignment of EU policies and the countries' general voting behaviour. Similarly to Benelux, the V4 countries are not each other's most common voting partners in terms of vote similarity (see chapter 4.5). However, with regard to synchronous opposition in terms of common blocking attempts in numbers, as well as overall cooperation based on the results of the permutation test, we can see significant indications of high-level cooperation. Considering the latter, the values between the four countries are all higher than expected and are significant at the 1% level (only in terms of the Czech–Polish synchronous opposition results are the values significant at the 5% level).

Coming to the less formalized groups, we were still able to find traces of group cohesiveness in the NB6 and the MED7 groups. In the NB6, the Baltic states and Finland are listed as top partners for the group members in terms of vote similarity due to the countries' high share of supporting votes, while Sweden and Denmark usually end up at the bottom of the voting partner list. We identified a significant level of coordination among the NB6 group members, although at different levels of intensity, and no common pattern in voting behaviour was detectable in terms of synchronous opposition votes (see chapter 4.4). Instead, we found evidence of relevant internal group dynamics, which are going to be elaborated on later. As for MED7, Cyprus, France, and Greece are usually at the top of the voting partner list of the other members due to the countries' high share of supporting vote cast, similarly to the NB6. However, in terms of synchronous opposition and the level of coordination suggested by the permutation test we were not able to detect signs of group cohesion. Here, internal group dynamics is the decisive factor in the analysis of the countries' voting behaviour (see chapter 4.3).

Finally, neither the E3 nor the W3, two informal, non-institutionalized, and single-issue minilateral groups, can be considered coherent formats because the members' voting behaviour differs significantly in different policy areas. Considering the E3, the voting behaviour of France, Germany, and the UK radically differs from each other, and our permutation test suggests that the overall cooperation among the three countries is smaller than expected under the null hypothesis of random contingencies (see chapter 4.2). Likewise, the level of group cohesion in the case of the W3 is very low; in the triple constellation, we have only found some level of cooperation between the German-Polish bilateral relation (see chapter 4.6). At the same time, while the German and French cooperation intensified during the investigated period, the voting statistics confirm that Poland gradually finds itself on the opposite end of the German and French positions in key policy areas.

Our quantitative analysis reveals important evidence for internal group dynamics in most of the examined minilateral formats. In Benelux, the Belgian and the Luxembourg positions are more closely aligned to each other than to the Netherlands. In the case of the V4, we can see hints of a V2+2 dynamic, as Czechia and Slovakia show a greater level of EU policy alignment, as do Hungary and Poland. Within the NB6, closer coordination can be seen among the Nordic and the Baltic states, and Finland acts as a bridge between these two blocks. Considering the MED7, we can also identify visible sup-groups: Cyprus and Malta, on the one hand, sometimes joined by Greece, and the Iberian countries (Spain and Portugal) on the other. Concerning the E3 and the W3, no internal group dynamic can be traced.

The statistics also indicate relevant relations in group members' coordination of voting records with other Member States outside their group. The voting data among the members of the Frugal Four (Austria, Denmark, the Netherlands, and Sweden) demonstrate a great alignment of policy coordination and a significantly high level of cooperation, not just in terms of financial policy but overall voting data. The Visegrad countries share a closer alignment of their voting record with the Baltic states, Romania, Greece and Cyprus, and Luxembourg, and, except for Poland, with Finland as well. The most common external voting partner for MED7 members are Croatia and Slovenia, as reflected in the voting records of Cyprus, Greece, Italy, Malta, Portugal, and Spain. Regarding the two larger Member States, France and Germany, it is generally difficult to find countries with whom they share a significant level of cooperation.

For France, we can notice some alignment with certain Nordic and Baltic countries, e.g. Denmark, Estonia, Finland, and Sweden, but also with Czechia and Luxembourg. Regarding Germany, the most relevant voting partner is its southern neighbour, Austria, but we can also see some level of voting alignment with other countries, such as Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, or Slovakia. Finally, the closest partners of the UK are either with whom it shares either a high number of "did not vote" records due to opt-outs, like Ireland, or which have similar records in terms of non-supporting votes, like the Netherlands or Sweden, or a mixture of both, like Denmark.

REVIEW AND ANALYSIS OF THE VOTING RECORDS

We have also analysed whether the voting behaviour of Member States became more cooperative over the two EP political cycles examined. Looking at the share of an average group member's non-supporting votes compared to all votes, we can state that there was an increase in the level of conflict in the Council between 2009-2014 and 2014-2019. Although the calculus is to some extent distorted, as there are large differences between each Member State's ratio of supporting and non-supporting votes within the groups, we can still draw conclusions regarding the voting pattern of the minilateral groups and their members in the Council.

Among the six groups, the E3 has by far the highest share of non-supporting votes to all votes, with 5.93% in both periods, although this result is mainly due to the UK's voting pattern (see Table 1). For the sake of comparison, while the UK cast 140 non-supporting votes in total between 2009-2019, Germany cast 54, and France only 3 (IFAT 2021). The Weimar Triangle would come second after the E3; here the German and the Polish (43 votes) shares are striking. With only 0.03%, the V4 has the third largest share of non-supporting votes, where beside the Polish numbers the Hungarian ones (40 votes) are above the V4 average. Benelux comes next, still in the 2% range, with the Dutch (49 votes) and the Belgian results (22 votes) standing out. The NB6 and the MED7 are at the bottom of the list, with a 1.49% and 1.09%. share of non-supporting votes, respectively.

As stated above, there is an observable increase in the level of conflict, i.e. the share of non-supporting votes to all votes, among the six examined groups. Here, the V4 showed the largest growth with 1.38% between the two periods. This increase is mainly due to the changed Hungarian (2.66% to 5.10%) and Polish voting behaviours (3.11% to 5.10%), although the Czech

(2.81% to 3.01%) and Slovakian (1.18% to 2.08%) shares of non-supporting votes increased too, but to a lesser extent. The most critical policy areas in which the highest number of non-supporting votes were cast are environment & health, and the energy & industry &research & space areas.

The second largest growth was achieved by Benelux, with 1.05%. In this case, the Belgian increase is especially striking (1.03% to 3.48%); for Luxembourg, a small growth can be observed (1.18% to 1.62%), while the Dutch numbers remain high (4.14% to 4.40%). For Benelux, a change of preference in casting non-supporting votes can be noticed: in the first period, it is dominated by the finance area, mainly linked to the negotiations over the MFF, while in the second the most affected policies are justice and home affairs & institutional and agriculture areas.

The increase of the E3 by 1.04% is due to the UK's growth (10.51% to 16.00%) alone, while both the German (5.77% to 3.48%) and the French shares (0.29% to 0.23%) decreased between the two periods. The last group where a minor increase of 0.05% can be observed is the MED7, in this regard the Cypriot (0.29% to 1.39%) and the Greek shares (0.59% to 1.39%) are above average.

Contrasting trends can be seen in the remaining two groups, the NB6 and the Weimar Triangle. Here the largest decrease was performed by the NB6 with 0.35%, in particular by Denmark (3.40% to 1.62%), Sweden (2.66% to 1.85%), and Estonia (1.62% to 0.69%). Similarly to the change of preference in various policy areas by Benelux, regarding the NB6 the most substantial decrease of non-supporting votes can be observed in the finance policy area between the two periods, which has to do with the MFF negotiations in the first period. The other minilateral group where a small decrease of 0.13% can be seen is the Weimar Triangle. Within the group itself, contrasting developments between the German and Polish voting behaviour can be observed: while the first became more conformist, the second became more confrontational over time, but altogether the German decrease beat the Polish increase in terms of percentage change in non-supporting votes cast.

THE EFFECTS OF BREXIT

The academic literature surveyed by Lang and von Ondarza claims that Brexit will increase the block-building nature of the EU, as many European countries are forced to look for new contact partners after the UK's departure

from the EU. The post-Brexit European era will be defined by a power struggle, as many Member States, especially small and medium-sized ones, will have to forge new coalitions to outweigh large or larger blocks, dominated by the remaining two "big players" of the EU, France and Germany. Our findings can largely support the academic literature, as there is only a minority of national diplomats who claim that Brexit either does not affect the political weight of their respective group in the EU (Interview 17), or that it will not result in a major change in terms of the functioning of the EU (Interview 12).

The most commonly named effect of Brexit is a thoroughly practical one, meaning that the Member States have to intensify their cooperation and reach out to countries they would not normally have reached out to in pre-Brexit times (Interview 2, 4, 7, 11, 14, 15). This view is very much present in policy areas such as financial and budgetary policy, defence and security policy, the single market, and trade policy. In terms of geographical distribution, the country representatives claiming that the UK used to fight many battles for their country are predominantly from Northern Europe, Central and Eastern Europe, and Malta. Additionally, both French and German national officials confirmed that the E3 will lose some of its relevance, as the UK will not be at the table in Brussels anymore (Interview 8, 16). At the same time, both countries will have to pay special attention not to outmanoeuvre the EU or the EEAS by taking side with the UK on issues of foreign affairs, which could risk the EU's unity.

With the UK's departure from the EU, a new competition for influence will characterize the EU in the years to come. According to a French official, France has been investing more into the development of bilateral relations in the EU in recent years (Interview 16). This development is also against the background of Brexit to understand, according to a Polish official: regarding the Weimar Triangle and the whole Eastern dimension of the EU, one can observe the current French leadership's pursuit to build the country's influence in the region (Interview 13).

Brexit will certainly influence the balance of power in the EU. The classical European power triangle of France, Germany, and the UK is over, and a European balance will need to be found to counterweigh an overly influential France and Germany. This broken European balance of power is a lose-lose issue for France and Germany in the long run, according to a senior Luxembourg official. "Either they work closely together, and the others complain about that the two big guys calling all the shots [...] Alternatively

they do not work closely together, and then they block each other and block everything" (Interview 3). A possible way out of this deadlock could be increased cooperation of various minilateral formats, which can balance the European power system by creating bridges between the remaining two big powers and the rest of the Union.

GROUP IDENTITY AND THE EUROPEAN 'LINGUA FRANCA'

During the interviews we also wanted to find out whether the minilateral groups included in the research share a common group identity, and what language is most commonly used in the interaction of the group members. Concerning the first, we can conclude that identity is the only common aspect in the examined minilateral groups: regardless of the age of the group or its level of institutionalization, almost every national representative claimed that the group their country belongs to has some sort of identity.

In some cases, group identity was associated with certain values and norms. The most frequently mentioned values and norms were the protection of the rule of law, democracy, and the advance of European integration. These are particularly present in the self-assessment of national officials from Benelux (Interview 1, 3, 6), the NB6 (Interview 11, 14), and to a lesser extent in the MED7 (Interview 10).

Another frequently mentioned expression of identity is geographical or regional affiliation. The Benelux group is an Atlanticist format (Interview 6), while the MED7 is associated with the Mediterranean dimension, the geographical place the members share (Interview 10, 17). For the NB6 it is articulated as a "stronger feeling towards the North" (Interview 12), and for the V4 identity is about being part of Central Europe (Interview 5, 7, 13).

Group identity is sometimes expressed as a preference for a certain policy with which the group is often associated. Regarding Benelux, this is the single market (Interview 6), while for the other groups it is more closely linked to foreign policy: the E3 has a "common responsibility for stability and peace in the Middle East region" (Interview 8), the MED7's trademark issues are related to Libya or the Eastern Mediterranean (Interview 10, 17), the NB6 is linked to the Eastern Partnership, Russia, and Ukraine, as well as concerns regarding hybrid threats or disinformation (Interview 4), and the Weimar Triangle is about an inner European reconciliation process between the Western and Eastern dimension of the EU (Interview 8). Furthermore, both the MED7 and

the NB6 have expressed preferences for climate and environmental policies. MED7 is dedicated to the protection of biodiversity in the Mediterranean Sea (Interview 17), while NB6 focuses on environmental matters connected to the Baltic Sea (Interview 12).

In other cases, the common identity has a more abstract nature, which frequently has to do with historical and political reasons. In the case of the V4, its perceived non-compliance in many policy areas can often be traced back to deeper historical reasons connected to a common experience during Communism, and the transitional period and resulting political consequences that followed. According to a senior Czech official, the V4 often has strong opinions in many areas, which sometimes causes confusion: "they [the rest of the EU] tell us what we have to do [...], and they are surprised if it is not working like that" (Interview 7).

A different historical dimension can be seen in the Benelux case. Here, mainly due to the long-standing cooperation in the Union, there is a certain common culture, for instance in administrational and consular affairs, manifested in the representation of all Benelux citizens by any Benelux country in many foreign countries (Interview 1). Also, there is a strong external perception that the Benelux countries form a block, according to a senior Luxembourg official. "...when a new ambassador comes to COREPER, there is a tendency to sort of think, 'ah, yes, Benelux, the three of them'" (Interview 3). The perception of the Benelux countries forming a homogenous coalition fades away over time, once foreign diplomats realize the subtle differences between the three countries, but this external image does exist on the surface.

Finally, three national officials claimed that a certain minilateral group has no identity at all. In a French view this is the case for the MED7 (Interview 16), in a Polish for the Weimar Triangle (Interview 13), and in a Slovakian for the V4 (Interview 15).

There is at least one aspect on which respondents from all six minilateral groups agree: the most commonly used language in European politics is English. This is not expected to change, regardless of Brexit. The interviews also indicate the use of secondary regional languages in the case of some groups, assuming, of course, that the representatives speak the language. The most commonly mentioned languages are, in the Benelux case, Dutch (Interview 3, 6) and French (Interview 3), in the NB6 Danish (Interview 2)

and Swedish (Interview 2, 12), and in the Visegrad Group Czech could be a secondary language among the Czech, Polish, and Slovak participants (Interview 7). Only the French respondent mentioned that French could be the first language in meetings with colleagues (Interview 16).

THE V4'S EXTERNAL PERCEPTIONS

Our findings suggest that national diplomats delegated to the EU have firm perceptions of the V4. First and foremost, the V4 is seen as a formal, structural, and institutionalized format (Interview 2, 3, 4, 10, 11), whose members regularly hold consultations and coordinate their positions with each other on many levels in the Council, from the Antici level to the COREPER level (Interview 2), they have rotating presidencies (Interview 2, 10), and in general work in a systematic way (Interview 10). Although the V4 is not a well-institutionalized format, in reality, the perceived institutionalized and formal character of the group by non-members is not viewed in a positive and productive way: the group's formal character is usually associated with rigidity, which makes it impossible for the group to have the necessary flexibility to move and make compromises in the Council. This results in the blockages of files, for example, on migration policy (Interview 3).

Although the V4 members are not aligned on every policy issue (Interview 16), which is not exceptional for members of minilateral groups in general, some V4 members are still struggling to join certain initiatives, for fear it could break the group's unity if not everybody is onboard (Interview 2). In other instances, the opposite is the case, when members are forced into taking a position they might not feel their own for the sake of upholding group unity. In both cases, group membership can easily turn into a source of stress for members.

These concerns affect two members of the V4 in the assessment of European national officials, Czechia and Slovakia. According to a Danish official, the two countries "have problems leaving their group on issues", but at the same time, "it hurts [...] if they have to divide the Visegrad" (Interview 2). A Swedish respondent questioned what benefit Czechia drew from the V4: "if you see the current politics sometimes you wonder what for instance the Czech Republic is getting out of the Visegrad cooperation in that sense, given the very different political views that are expressed in some of the other parts of the Visegrad Group" (Interview 4).

The internal divisions in the V4 and the discussion regarding the V2+2 are not new phenomena, much academic literature (see Strnad 2018, or Gyárfášová 2021) and media coverage (see Kerényi 2020, or Brzozowski, Plevák and Gabrizova 2020) has focused on the issue. Based on our expert interviews, we can confirm that the perception of the V4's inner division is present in the external views of the group.

MINILATERAL GROUPS IN PRACTICE

Beside examining the internal cohesiveness of the voting behaviour of the six minilateral groups, the study also analysed the dynamics and possible alliances between two or more countries within their minilateral groups and beyond in the Council of the EU. In this regard, our findings suggest that minilateral groups have a much smaller influence on the overall functioning of the work within the Council than we initially anticipated.

The general assessment of the respondents of minilateral groups is that they do not really fit into the political and diplomatic realities of the Council because these formats do not provide their members with the flexibility that is needed for negotiations. A frequently emphasized argument during the interviews was that minilateral groups can have a rigid character (Interview 3, 16) when Member States frequently stick to the same formats (Interview 6, 13, 15), thereby making it difficult for the EU27/28 to reach a consensus.

Most interviewees say that the work in the Council can be characterized as fluid, flexible, and ad hoc (Interview 2, 3, 13, 14, 16), where coalitions are variable and constantly changing (Interview 6, 11). Rather than the minilateral groups, it is the so-called like-minded groups that constitute the decisive factor, as these are organized in a flexible manner around the single files that are being discussed (Interview 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 10, 11, 14, 15, 16). As European politics largely depends on variable coalitions of like-minded groups, the vast majority of our respondents could not clearly define the level of cooperation within the group or name the most important contact partner of their country, mentioning that these heavily depend on the given issue or file (Interview 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17). The elusive nature of the *modus operandi* of European politics is further reinforced by the fact that it often depends on informal aspects such as personal relations and networks (Interview 2, 3, 6, 13, 14), or banal things like the seating order in the Council (Interview 3, 7).

That being said, minilateral groups are not irrelevant or useless for European politics. They are beneficial for a wide range of issues, facilitating the exchange of information, functioning as an enhanced power multiplier tool, and providing the ability to precook decisions or test ideas in a smaller circle. However, since doing business in the Council is better characterized as fluid and flexible, like-minded groups are a better fit than minilateral groups. Although the existence of minilateral groups is also justified, they are just "one tool in the toolbox amongst others" (Interview 16).

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ANNEX

Table 1
Share of average group member's non-supporting votes to all votes, in each period and in both periods together (in %)

	2009-2014	2014-2019	2009-2019
Benelux	2.12	3.17	2.53
E3	5.53	6.57	5.93
MED7	1.07	1.12	1.09
NB6	1.62	1.27	1.49
V4	2.44	3.82	2.98
W3	3.06	2.93	3.01

6. ANNEX

QUESTIONNAIRE

1. In your opinion what is the function of minilateral groups in the EU?
2. Could you list some pros and cons of minilateral groups?
3. How many minilateral groups can you name your country is a member of?
4. How would you describe the level and regularity of cooperation among the group members? (e.g. always/ad hoc meetings before COREPER / Council meetings, never etc.)
5. Could you name policy areas, in which your country has similar preferences to the other members of the group?
6. Which country is your country's first / second / third contact partner within your group in general?
7. Could you name policy areas, in which your country has a different preference for contact partners to the other members of the group?
8. Which country is your country's first / second / third contact partner outside of your group in general?
9. Could you name policy areas, in which your country has a different preference for contact partners outside of your group than the one you mentioned before?
10. Which country is the easiest and most difficult to work with within your group in general, and why?
11. Which country is the easiest and most difficult to work with outside of your group in general, and why?
12. Do you act united or more separated with your group members during the negotiation processes in COREPER I / COREPER II?
13. If you are contacted by countries outside of your group, are you contacted together with your group members, or individually?
14. In your opinion, how successfully can your group shape the common EU agenda in general / specific policy areas?
15. Would you say your group has a group identity? If yes, how would you describe it?

INTERVIEWEES

1. Belgian official (based at the Permanent Representation to the EU), via video call, December 2020.

2. Danish official (based at the Permanent Representation to the EU), via video call, January 2021.

3. Senior Luxembourg official (based at the Permanent Representation to the EU), over the phone, January 2021.

4. Swedish official (based at the Permanent Representation to the EU), via video call, February 2021.

5. Hungarian official (based at the Permanent Representation to the EU), via video call, February 2021.

6. Dutch official (based at the Permanent Representation to the EU), via video call, February 2021.

7. Senior Czech official (based at the Permanent Representation to the EU), via video call, February 2021.

8. German official (formerly based at the Permanent Representation to the EU), via video call, March 2021.

9. Polish official (formerly based at the Permanent Representation to the EU), via email, March 2021.

10. Maltese official (based at the Permanent Representation to the EU), via video call, March 2021.

11. Estonian official (formerly based at the Permanent Representation to the EU), via video call, March 2021.

12. Retired senior Finnish official (formerly based at the Permanent Representation to the EU), via video call, April 2021.

13. Polish official (formerly based at the Permanent Representation to the EU), via video call, April 2021.

14. Latvian official (formerly based at the Permanent Representation to the EU), via video call, April 2021.

15. Slovakian official (formerly based at the Permanent Representation to the EU), via video call, May 2021.

16. French official (based at the Permanent Representation to the EU), via video call, May 2021.

17. Greek official (based at the Permanent Representation to the EU), over the phone, July 2021.