

Slavkov Triangle as a Minilateral Grouping Within the European Union: A Quantitative Analysis

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Abstract

By taking the main aspirations of the minilateralism as a theoretical framework, this research aims to investigate the origins and prospects of the Slavkov Triangle, which was initiated as a new regional platform between Austria, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia in 2015. The main motivation of the grouping has been to enhance the cooperation of these States in various areas, ranging from energy security, transport infrastructure, youth employment and cross-border relations to the social dimension of European integration. The regional platform was regarded as problematic as an alternative to the Visegrad cooperation, since it would imply the isolation of Hungary and Poland. Forming a response to these inquiries, this article aims to find out whether the Slavkov Triangle presents a new, sustainable and alternative central European format. In this respect, the focal point of the research is to answer the question whether the Slavkov Triangle fits theoretically to the traditional 'minilateral' grouping definition within the European Union (EU). To reveal whether the members of the Triangle have adopted a concrete joint position in EU decision-making, this paper examines the voting patterns of the members of the Triangle by conducting a quantitative analysis of the voting record of the members of the Triangle in the Council of the EU. The empirical analysis will show the degree to which these countries vote together as a minilateral group. The time frame is designated in two-time spans. The first time span focuses on the time between 2010 and 2015, while the second time span covers voting records from 2015 (the beginning of the initiative) until 2022 November (the most recent date of the voting data that is publicly available). This would help grasp the comparative case basis of voting records of these member states before and after the Triangle.

In this way, the current study empirically contributes to the burgeoning scholarly literature on regional groupings within the EU.

Keywords: Slavkov Triangle, Minilateralism, European Union, Central Eastern Europe, Minilateral groupings, Regional cooperation

JEL codes: D72, F50, F59

Introduction

Minilateral groupings within the European Union (EU), such as Benelux, Three Seas Initiative, or Visegrad Four (V4), have always been on the table, even before the term ‘minilateralism’ drew academic attention within the literature. However, minilateralism as an academic discussion started to gain relative importance in recent years, especially with the decreasing importance of multilateralism, in the face of the multiple crises of the Union. That is why the recent attention from academia emerged to investigate the main motivations, aspirations, pros and cons of minilateralism. Brandi et al. [2015] highlight that the new inclination towards minilateralism is not to replace the multilateral process. While such a stance might imply that this new form of grouping can be a valuable tool in augmenting multilateral processes by accelerating decision-making, Cooper and Fabrini [2021] argue that these groupings, as bottom-up political cooperation, might imply a special form of differentiation within the EU. In this respect, what kind of perspective might minilateralism provide and bring is yet to be investigated, as it could presumably pose a risk of blockage in the decision-making of the EU as well. To enlighten such an inquiry, one of the suitable ways to trace the potential of the regional groupings is to trace the voting recordings of the member states of said groupings. Yet, there is a gap in the scholarly literature on the analysis of voting behaviours of the member states of these regional groupings within the EU.

In an attempt to fill this gap, this paper aims to analyse the Slavkov Triangle, which is one of the recently emerging groupings within the Union. It will rely on a quantitative data set collected by tracing the voting recordings of members of the Triangle, i.e., Austria, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia. In doing so, it might provide an example on testing the potential of the different minilateral groupings for further empirical research agenda in the burgeoning literature.

To this end, it will first explain the European political landscape, within which the importance of minilateralism has gained impetus. This is of critical importance for understanding how the high level of interest in multi-

lateralism has faded away recently throughout the crises of the EU. Thus, the research offers an analysis of the regional grouping by placing it within the larger context of current European affairs. Although the risks and the chances of minilateralism remain yet to be seen, it is relevant to form the necessary ground to investigate whether minilateralism might offer a solution by accelerating the decision-making process or not. After that, this paper will provide a brief framework of minilateralism to understand the definition and the rationale of the concept. It will mainly utilize the valuable classification of minilateral groups within the EU as identified by the German Think Tank Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP). Then, it will shift to the main motivations of the Slavkov Triangle to reveal whether it conceptually fits the traditional definition of minilateralism. The main research question of this research is as follows: to what extent the Slavkov Triangle could achieve fulfilling the traditional definition of minilateralism. This is of critical importance, because in that case, it is highly likely that it could have replaced or decreased the importance of the V4. As one of the main sources of debate at the very beginning of the initiative was whether it would replace or duplicate the V4 or decrease its importance [Kalan, 2015], it will also briefly try to reflect on some comments about the question, by looking to the levels and areas of cooperation as well. These inquiries will be enlightened through the empirical findings of this research, which will investigate the voting records of the member states in the Council. Through interlinking the theoretical discussions with the empirical findings, the research will contribute to existing empirical data on the voting behaviours of these states within the example of the Slavkov Triangle, which can broaden the theoretical implications of the concept for future research implications.

1. Research method

In line with these aims, the empirical research consists of data collection from the EU's official website¹, which reveals the published voting results of the Council of Ministers in compliance with the EU's transparency criteria. The website has all the relevant data records, including founding agreements, directives, or negotiations of the Union from 1952 until now. That is why the data collection from this source will fulfil the specific suitability for the aims of this research (measurement validity). Accordingly, this research will code and investigate the voting records and patterns of Austria, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia from 2010 to the very recent date of voting available, November 2022. This will be valuable in revealing whether they identify a common position in the decision-making system of the EU after the establishment of the Slavkov initiative. While analysing these datasets,

1 <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/>

this research will methodologically apply quantitative analysis. It will also utilize the database of the official website of VoteWatch (<https://www.vote-watch.eu/>), which is an independent non-profit organization. The website offers a user-friendly, searchable format and access to the voting activities of the Member States.

2. European political context

To understand the current relationship between multilateralism and unilateral groupings within the Union and the origins of the concept of unilateralism, one must first overview the current political context in the EU, within which unilateralism gained importance. That is why this part will briefly explain the current state of affairs that the EU is facing. In recent years, the European integration process entered a new phase of instability and uncertainty due to recent crises, namely, the eurozone crisis of 2009, the European refugee crisis of 2015, Brexit, the Covid-19 global pandemic, and the recent Ukrainian War, which restrained its solidarity, cohesion, balance and multilateral endeavours critically. Spijkerboer [2016] argues that the multiplication of problems generated a wave of storm. These crises did put the EU's resilience, stability, and identity to the test with the generated repercussions of deepening of the core-periphery divide, mobilization, differentiated integration debates, and politicization driven by the populist Euro-sceptic right-wing parties.

Technocratic outcomes of each crisis of European integration differed considerably. For example, during the eurozone crisis, integration at the supranational level was reinforced by establishing a Banking Union or European Stability Mechanism [Spijkerboer, 2016]. Hobolt and Wratil [2015] argue that the reason for that was the utilitarian considerations and relative benefits of preserving the Euro. However, the same empowerment of the EU institutions was not achieved during the refugee crisis of 2015, because of governance failures in crisis management, which aggravated politicization at the European level. Accordingly, the refugee crisis generated huge divergences of reactions from the Member States against the flow of people [Greenhill, 2016]. While Germany unilaterally opened its borders to the refugees, Central Eastern European Countries (CEECs) formed a rigid anti-refugee stance. The fact that they voted against accepting the distribution of refugees in the EU led to estrangement - especially of Hungary and Poland - from the EU. At the same time, this has been the driving factor of rapprochement between the countries of the V4. As Schäffer [2018] defines, while the eurozone crisis created North-South tension in the economy, the refugee crisis generated the East-West divide on migration. The increased divergences over the approaches and interests to the emerging challenges within the Union, culminated in the UK's exit from the EU, can

be interpreted as the concrete proof of waning faith in solidarity and multilateralism within the sui-generis organization of the EU.

Hooghe and Marks [2018] argue that the serious exogenous shocks brought forward by the crises generated transnational cleavages. These cleavages are putting serious limitations on the optimistic scenario of 'more' Europe. In addition, the more recent developments including the unclear path of Brexit, the French return to the EU's centre, the revitalization of Franco-German cooperation with the Aachen Treaty of 2019, unclarity over Germany's future direction following Merkel's withdrawal from politics and the new era under Olaf Scholz's Chancellory, increasing lukewarm attitudes of the CEECs towards the EU, the eruption of the global Covid-19 pandemic and the ongoing Ukrainian War, have all altered the working dynamics of the Union.

The driving acute repercussions of the crisis context of the Union revealed that large bureaucratic institutions, such as the EU, cannot be as efficiently responsive as preferred, since the diverse member states have divergent geopolitical priorities, national interests, resources, perspectives and imperatives to the threats to security [Moret 2016]. In this context, the decision-making process, which is time- and energy-consuming, often stalemates the forming of an immediate response. The slow decision-making process of the EU is widely referred to as a limit to its global actorhood within the literature on European studies [Christopher 1993; Niemann-Bretherton 2013]. The restraints of the slow-paced decision-making process became prominent especially during times of crisis, which present times of critical juncture necessitating immediate actions to make the system function again [Braun 2015]. Accordingly, constraints were put on the EU in terms of proposing supra-level actions and policy responses for problem-solving entailing the institutional changes at the European level.

In this context, where domestic concerns prevailed, the increased importance of the minilateral groupings as a flexible and alternative type of cooperation among member states became a question within the Union. Schäffer [2018] points out that the expansion of minilateral formats can help alleviate the multiple crises of the EU. In the same manner, Jankowski and Grzegorzolka [2014] argue that the reconsolidation of the European integration process can be achieved through the perspective of minilateralism. The being that agreements on politically feasible and functionally efficient solutions can be reached more quickly by the smaller-sized groups, having generally shared interests and relatively balanced capabilities [Moret 2016]. In this respect, regional collaborations of medium-sized players between like-minded member states are becoming increasingly appealing to European policymakers [Kuusik & Raik, 2018a].

3. Concept of minilateralism

In its purest form, minilateralism can be defined as the diplomatic process of formation of alliances and initiatives between the states within the already existing multilateral groupings, in order to increase cooperation and coordination in various areas. The cooperation areas are shaped based on the complexities of the subjects that are seen as highly complicated to tackle at the multilateral level. In this respect, minilateral groupings have emerged as “sub-groups of multilateral actors” [as cited in Bradi et al, 2018:1]. The process of formation of minilateralism attains different namings in different fields of cooperation. Within the foreign and security policy levels of the European Defence Agency and NATO, it is called ‘pooling and sharing’ or ‘smart defence’, respectively [Bogzeanu 2012]. Within the context of trade, it is often referred to as ‘smart multilateralism’ or ‘plurilateralism’ [Moret 2016].

The term originally started to be used by the literature in the 1980s, with the increasing liberalization of international trade [Fritsch, 1998; Kobrin, 1995]. Accordingly, it was within the framework of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) and its successor, the World Trade Organization (WTO). Jankowski and Grzegorzolka [2014] argue that since minilateralism was strongly correlated with economic protectionism, it traditionally had a negative connotation. However, the connotations of the term changed considerably due to the increased cooperation related to issues such as global governance and climate change during the course of time. More recently, minilateralism has become a critical trend of cooperation in achieving the states' mutual security objectives [Tow 2015]. In this respect, minilateral groupings connotated the endeavour of the states in proposing a solution to problems for the ‘common good’ of the formed alliances. Thus, the previous correlation of the term with economic protectionism was changed to mutually beneficial collaboration.

At the practical level, the minilateral initiatives within the EU have always existed, however, the term became a well-known and positive concept with Moises Naim's [2009:] valuable definition of minilateralism as “*the smallest possible number of countries needed to have the largest possible impact on solving a particular problem.*” The standing point of his definition was mainly about solving problems of cooperation in international trade. Additionally, it is also defined as “*...usually three, but sometimes four or five states meeting and interacting informally...to discuss issue-areas involving mutual threats to their security or, more often, to go over specific tasks related to building regional stability and order.*” [Tow-Envall, 2011: 62].

The definitional standpoints of the term can be applied to the grouping of small and medium-sized countries that aspire their concerns and interests to be heard within the EU [Kuusik-Raik, 2018b]. In addition to con-

tributing to the small and medium-sized states getting their voices heard, multilateral groupings can also reach ambitious goals that can go beyond the multilateral agreements in potential, especially in the policies of climate and international trade [Schäffer, 2018].

Within the EU example, minilateral initiatives are comprised of three or more EU neighbouring countries that have an aim to exchange ideas, implement joint projects, and formulate common positions regarding European affairs [Lang & Ondarza, 2018]. These groupings can either be in institutionalized formats or not. However, in most cases, they have established coordination and consultation mechanisms that will help strengthen their joint positions. The interaction between the grouping states takes place at the level of national governments, civil society actors, local authorities, or private businesses [Jankowski & Grzegorzolka, 2014].

In alignment with the offered definitional standpoint, German Think Tank SWP listed 14 regional groupings within the EU [Lang & Ondarza, 2018]. These are Founding Members, Benelux, EU-3, G6, Eurozone, Non-Euro Countries, Baltic States, Nordic-Baltic Eight, Nordic Countries, Southern European Countries, Visegrád Group, Weimar Triangle, Three-Seas Initiative, Ventotene Format. As their names suggest, they are formed either as regional groups or as functional groups [ibid]. While regional groups are formed between the neighbouring countries at the subregional level within the EU, functional groups are formed to intensify cooperation in various topics from the economy and trade to security [ibid]. In parallel with this classification of grouping, Jankowski & Grzegorzolka [2014] propose four rules that should be followed by the minilateral groupings. Minilateral groupings should be visible, meaning that they should show themselves with joint positions in the decision-making mechanisms of international politics, i.e., Council of the European Union (visibility). They should define certain areas of speciality in cooperation to facilitate harmony in their activities (specialization). Minilateral groupings should also be open to alliances and multilateral dialogues in various policy areas (openness). Lastly, they should contribute to the development of institutions and international peace in line with the principles of functionalism (functionality). By keeping these criteria for the formation of a minilateral format in mind, the next part will investigate what kind of grouping the Slavkov Triangle does represent. It will show the extent to which it could fit the definitional standpoint of the minilateralism, along with remarks on the empirical findings of the research.

4. Slavkov Triangle

The Slavkov declaration - also known as Austerlitz declaration or Austerlitz format - that established the Slavkov trilateral cooperation was signed between the three like-minded prime ministers of Austria, Slovakia, and the

Czech Republic: Chancellor Werner Faymann, Robert Fico, and Bohuslav Sobotka, in January 2015 [Kalan, 2015]. They agreed to meet every year at the head of governments' level, while the coordination of a tripartite working group would be achieved by the level of deputy foreign ministers. The main areas of cooperation on which the Slavkov Triangle put a strong emphasis were competitiveness in the internal market, industry research, and energy.

Both the place and the date it was signed have symbolic importance. The name of the initiative comes from where it was signed, i.e., Slavkov (Austerlitz), which is mostly known as the place where Napoleon secured his great victory in the Battle of the Three Emperors of 1805 (Napoleon, Tsar Alexander I, and Emperor Francis II) [Hungarian Spectrum, 2017]. At the same time, the date when it was signed was in the middle of the Ukrainian conflict, during which it was revealed that the V4 countries have been diverging in their responses and reactions regarding the sanctions against Russia [Jančoškòvò, 2017]. For example, while it reverberated firm criticisms from Poland, as the firm advocator of harsh sanctions against Russia [Tabor 2016], Hungary adopted a pro-Russian stance over the crisis [Jančoškòvò, 2017]. On the other side, Slovakia and the Czech Republic maintained a moderate position with regard to further sanctions against Russia. In this respect, there have been cleavages and a lack of consistency in actions within the V4 grouping regarding the Ukrainian crisis that affected the image of the regional grouping.

It should be acknowledged that the Slavkov Triangle has not emerged to form a pro-Russian regional format within the Union. However, it is known that Vienna has been incrementally engaging in developing the political dialogue with Russia because of the economic and energy-related interests, which would increase Austria's Baumgarten role over the gas transit pipeline as a continental gas hub [Ogrodnik, 2018]. Moreover, personal contacts, such as the Russian president's working visit to Vienna in June 2014 just three months after the Russian annexation of Crimea [ibid], that resulted in signing the contract for the construction of the South Stream gas pipeline, were proving Vienna's dovish policy vis-à-vis Moscow [Nič & Dostál, 2015]. In this context, Brandi et. al. [2015] argue that Austria saw the Czech Republic and Slovakia as potential allies due to their sceptical stance towards tightening EU sanctions against Russia [Möller-Nič, 2019]. At the same time, the fact that Austria, under the Social Democratic government, was striving to strengthen bilateral relations in Central Europe has been self-evident [Nič & Dostál, 2015]. With regard to this, the formation of a regional cooperation foreseeing the strengthening of the coordination among neighbouring social-democratic governments of the EU was one of the reasonable ways to insert more influence on the region in terms of

Austrian calculations. In addition, the cooperation among these countries, which are both neighbouring and historically connected, would open up a viable ground for cooperation in various common areas of cooperation.

Moreover, the reputation of the EU in general, and the V4 in particular, were damaged because of the unwillingness of V4 countries in accepting asylum seekers to assure the common good and solidarity for the common European good. In addition, the Czech Republic and Slovakia concretely showing their discontent with the political developments in Hungary and Poland appeared as the source of concern in terms of compliance with the EU norms and law [Möller-Nič, 2019]. Therefore, they have been seeking alternative alliances within the Union as well. In this respect, mutually converging interests and the search for cooperation culminated in the rapprochement of these three signatory States [Jančoškòvò, 2017]. The political context where the V4 could not propose a common position towards the European integration has been considered as the main reason for the triangle's existence [Brandi et al, 2015]. It has been widely believed that the deepening of relations could have been intensified through the Visegrad Plus format without forming a new regional grouping [Kalan, 2015].

The trilateral format came into existence through the Austro-Czech rapprochement facilitated by the mutual visits between prime ministers of the Czech Republic and Austria. Such alliance was of vital importance for the energy security of the Czech Republic, which has been aspiring for access to the Baumgarten hub [Kalan, 2015]. In this respect, the inclusion of Slovakia in the bilateral alliance between Austria and the Czech Republic would also be equally critical, mainly because of the mutual interests in infrastructure and energy issues [Kalan, 2015].

Apart from these aspirations, there has been a strong emphasis on the commitment to EU-wide pro-social reforms and ideological identity regarding the formation of the trilateral format [Möller & Nič, 2019]. The regional cooperation was based on coordination of the various policy fields including energy security, transport infrastructure, youth employment, cross-border relations and the social dimension of European integration [Kalan, 2015]. To this end, it was aiming to form joint positions of these socialist governments at the EU forum before each European Council [Kalan, 2015].

With these aspects, it was largely regarded as an alternative and duplicating platform of the V4. Tabor [2016] puts forward that a new regional grouping formed among Austria, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia may function as a challenge for the Visegrad Group. In fact, over the issue of its future prospective to substitute the V4 Group, there are diverging opinions within the literature. On the one hand, there are scholars arguing that the possibility of substitution of the V4 with the Slavkov Triangle remains low

[Schneider, 2015], while there are also more critical scholars being cautious in their assessments [Lázár, 2015].

Comparing the V4 and the Slavkov Triangle in terms of their incentives and potential to form joint positions among signatory states is well beyond the aims of this research, however, it was understood that the Slavkov Triangle - especially in the presence of the V4 - might only survive as a loose trilateral format in the following period, based on the ever-changing political context.

In this sense, while it might be argued that the triangle initially offered an alternative and prospective for the cooperation among signatory countries, the following period showed a very low possibility due to the successive governmental changes in the election rounds replacing the like-minded governments. Accordingly, the new Austrian Chancellor Sebastian Kurz did not show any concrete interest in strengthening bilateral relations with Slovakia and the Czech Republic [Möller & Nič, 2019]. In fact, at this point, whether they formed a joint position even from the very beginning should be investigated. Based on the empirical findings and quantitative analysis of this research, self-reflective remarks will be provided regarding the above-mentioned scholarly inquiry as to whether the Slavkov Triangle as a relatively newly emerging regional grouping has a prospect to substitute the V4 Group.

5. Findings and discussions

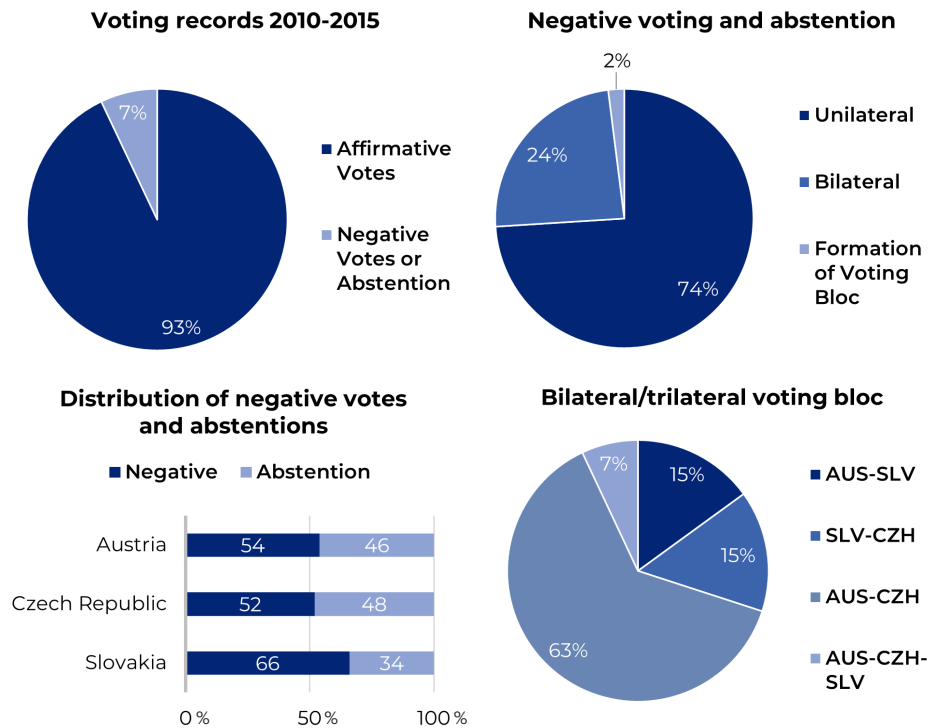
In order to situate a concrete place for the research in answering the main research question and relatedly emerging secondary issues within the literature as discussed in the previous parts, this research conducted an empirical analysis of the voting records of these Member States in the Council. The research focused on the records of negative votes and abstention in order to reveal whether they formed any 'voting bloc' within the decision-making process of the EU. The reason for that being that the affirmative votes would not be a distinguishing factor, on the grounds that they might formulate alliances altogether with other member states. Moreover, in most cases, similar policy preferences are the reason for Member States voting together against a proposal [Hosli et.al.]

The voting data was collected from the beginning of the Triangle, January 2015, until the latest available date, November 2022. In order to provide a broader analytical framework on a comparative basis of the period before and after the formation of the Triangle, voting records from 2010 of Austria, the Czech Republic and Slovakia were also collected. In total, 554 and 795 legislations were collected, respectively from before and after the formation of the Triangle. These legislations included directives, regula-

tions, and decisions in a wide range of topics, from agriculture, budget, justice and home affairs, economic and monetary affairs, environment and fisheries to foreign and security policy.

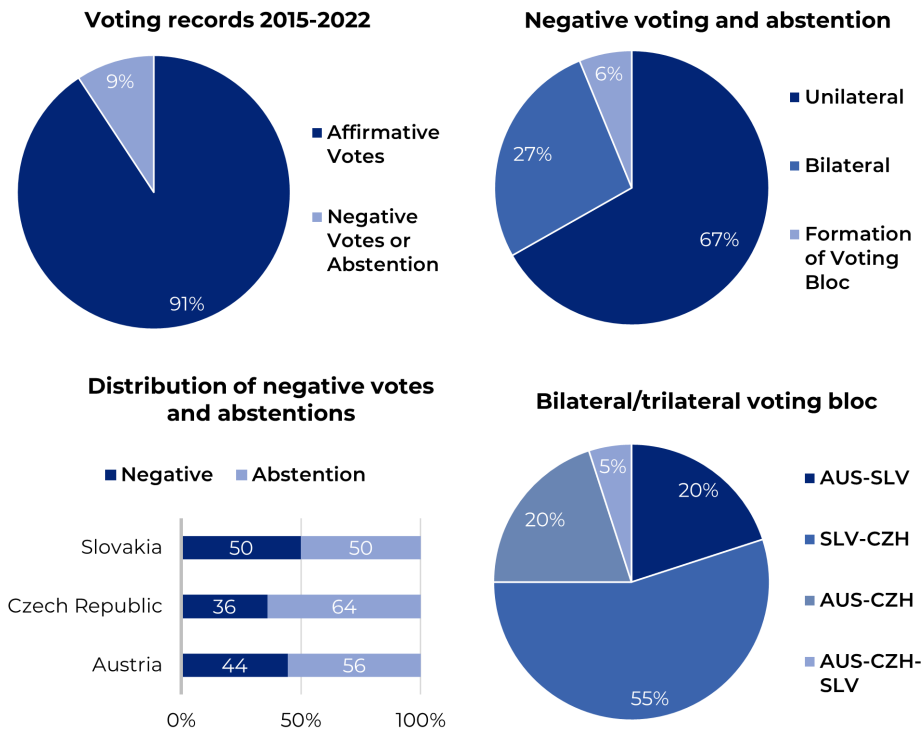
Within the given time frame, the total number of votes, negative voting and abstentions, as well as the distribution of votes including both unilateral and bilateral positions are respectively shown in the table below.

Figure 1: Voting behaviours of Austria, the Czech Republic and Slovakia before the Slavkov Triangle



Source: Author’s own elaboration based on the collected empirical data

Figure 2: Voting behaviours of the Member States of the Slavkov Triangle



Source: Author’s own elaboration based on the collected empirical data

The empirical findings of the research show that the total percent of the negative and abstention votes compared to affirmative votes are considerably low during both time frames. Therefore, the chances of forming a negative voting bloc by the Triangle members before and after the establishment of the Triangle is revealed to be relatively slight. The comparison between before and after the formation of the Triangle shows that it enhanced the bilateral and trilateral cooperation among these three member states altogether. Yet, member states that formed bilateral voting blocs altered remarkably. While the voting bloc formed by Austria and the Czech Republic was as high as 63 percent before the formation of the Triangle, it drastically dropped to 7 percent after the formation of the Triangle. Another remarkable change was the formed voting bloc between Slovakia and the Czech Republic. While it was as low as 15 percent, it remarkably increased to 57 percent after the establishment of the Triangle. In the same way, the trilateral voting bloc increased to 22 percent from 7 percent. Therefore, the triangle opened up leeway for a perspective of formulating the common positions for these member states. However, considering the low levels of

converging negative and abstention voting behaviours as well, it became clear that the Slavkov Triangle could slightly contribute to the formation of a common position of these member states within the decision-making process of the Council. These member states' unilateral voting behaviours are presumably shaped by their national interests, which prevail over the formulation of common positions within such minilateral grouping. The policy preferences may diverge accordingly.

In this light, the empirical analysis also answers whether the presence or absence of like-minded governments has been the driving factor of the initiative in formulating common positions. While it is discussed that the sustainability of the initiative has been waning in the absence of like-minded governments, the general loose form of bilateral and trilateral voting blocs within the years also showed that the presence of like-minded governments at the very beginning cannot be considered as a variable in determining the voting behaviours of the members of the Triangle either.

Another prominent point observed was that there have been overlapping voting behaviours between Slovakia and the Czech Republic at a relatively higher rate than the bilateral voting blocs formed with Austria. That led to raising the question whether the bilateral voting block of Slovakia and the Czech Republic was formed within the V4 format. In order to answer such an inquiry, the research broadened the analytical part by comparing the voting behaviours of Hungary and Poland within the V4 format as well. Accordingly, affirmative votes of the Slavkov Triangle versus the negative votes or abstention of Hungary and Poland were traced. Out of the analyzed legislations, only 13 times were recorded when the Polish-Hungarian axis formed a counter-block against the Slavkov grouping. While such observance implied a critical conclusion for the individual-interests-based voting behaviours of the member states regardless of the minilateral groupings they formed, it lays a legitimate basis for future research inquiries that can be built on the comparative case studies within the minilateral groupings formed by different member states.

Moreover, the inquiries on the minilateral groupings within the EU, which theoretically are expected to facilitate the decision-making process and take the lead to form a common position among the members, bring up even further questions as to what determines the voting behaviour, if member states of the other/larger minilateral groupings also form only loose cooperation among themselves, as in the example of the Slavkov Triangle. In this light, the main aspirations of the minilateralism in setting an ambitious agenda of cooperation among the states might need to be reconsidered.

Overall, the impact of the Slavkov Triangle remains slight and weak to this day. Yet, considering the increased meetings and dialogue on different

issues among the participant states, the minilateral groupings and their contribution to regional governance can still provide a robust opportunity and benefit for the participatory states, especially given the waning context of multilateralism. As for future research implications, larger and multiple minilateral groupings should be analyzed and compared within this framework to provide generalizable conclusions about the efficiency and impact of such groupings.

Conclusion

Minilateral groupings within the EU have recently gained scholarly attention due to the crisis context of the Union. With consideration to the larger context of recent European affairs, this study interlinked the theoretical discussions with the empirical data by analysing the Slavkov Triangle, one of the recently emerging groupings in the Union.

The empirical analysis showed the degree to which the prospects of the Slavkov Triangle, which has been formed as a regional format, fit the theoretical concept of minilateralism. It revealed that the triangle is parallel with the definitional standpoint of minilateral grouping in terms of the ambitious agenda and the aims defined at the beginning of the trilateral cooperation. However, the performed empirical analysis found that, given the low levels of converging voting preferences, the grouping could not take the initiative to form a robust joint position among these states at the intergovernmental decision-making level of the Council of the EU. That is why it can be said that although it enhanced the cooperation perspective among these member states, the trilateral grouping foreseen by the Slavkov Triangle has remained only as a very loose form of cooperation. Moreover, its chances of presenting a new, sustainable and alternative central European format remain limited, especially considering the high levels of converging voting behaviours of Slovakia and the Czech Republic.

By and large, this research contributes to existing data on the voting behaviour of these members of the Triangle, which can both broaden theoretical discussions and enlighten future empirical research inquiries regarding minilateralism as a theoretical framework. I believe that further research on this issue within both different examples of minilateralism, comparative cases of different minilateral groupings and different methodological frameworks, may expand and deepen our understanding of multilateral groupings and the voting behaviour of the members of such groupings.

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