

Formal Intergovernmental Alliances in the European Union: Disappearing or Still Alive?¹

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Abstract

The leading opinion-making newspaper The Economist suggested during the time of the Constitutional Treaty negotiations that ‘there are no more fixed and reliable alliances in the EU. Countries team up with each other, depending on issue and circumstances’ (The Economist, February 6, 2003: 3). This was a daring suggestion in view of the history of long-term strategic relationships within Europe, especially the Franco-German and the Benelux, which have in the past played leadership role in the establishment and progress of European integration. Former Dutch Minister of Foreign Affairs, Jaap de Hoop Scheffer, also commented that the Constitutional Treaty negotiations have shown a “renaissance of bilateralism” in the new Europe: ‘With each new issue we are likely to see changing ad hoc coalitions of member states’ (De Hoop Scheffer 2003: 1). Similarly, Lord Kerr in his address at the Center for European Studies, Harvard University (11 July 2003) suggested that ‘[a]lliances [were] increasingly a matter of convenience; we can expect more of a wide-spread promiscuity among member states’. Do such assertions stand up to scholarly investigation? Is there any empirical evidence to suggest that the existing formal alliances in Europe are disappearing?

Analysing the case of the Visegrád Group this paper answers negatively. It argues that the strength of cooperation within formal alliances is not to be evaluated based on their coalitional cooperation in the end games of EU negotiations, which tend to attract most popular attention. Rather, the questions of viability of formal alliances need to shift from the end-game of EU negotiations to the day-to-day interactions between the lower-end of the government hierarchy, i.e. the government representatives at the technical and lower political level – this is where the vast majority of EU policy agenda is set and majority of policy formulations are agreed upon in the pre-negotiations within the Council working groups.

In view of these findings, the paper suggests that the prominent account of ‘two-level games’ by Putnam (1988) which has influenced most of the recent literature on EU negotiations might need to be revised to take into account the “third-level” negotiations within formal alliances.. The argument introduced is that next to the domestic constituencies and EU-level negotiations, as depicted by Putnam (1988), governments involved in formal alliances also simultaneously negotiate with their alliance partners.

¹ The paper is work in progress – please do not cite without author’ permission.

Introduction

The leading opinion-making newspaper *The Economist* suggested during the time of the Constitutional Treaty negotiations that 'there are no more fixed and reliable alliances in the EU. Countries team up with each other, depending on issue and circumstances'.² This was a daring suggestion in view of the history of long-term strategic relationships within Europe, especially the Franco-German and the Benelux, which have in the past played leadership role in the establishment and progress of European integration. Former Dutch Minister of Foreign Affairs, Jaap de Hoop Scheffer, also commented that the Constitutional Treaty negotiations have shown a "renaissance of bilateralism" in the new Europe: 'With each new issue we are likely to see changing ad hoc coalitions of member states' (De Hoop Scheffer 2003: 1). Similarly, Lord Kerr in his address at the Center for European Studies, Harvard University (11 July 2003) suggested that '[a]lliances [were] increasingly a matter of convenience; we can expect more of a widespread promiscuity among member states'. Do such assertions stand up to scholarly investigation? Is there any empirical evidence to suggest that the existing formal alliances in Europe are disappearing?

The paper seeks to answer this question by investigating the case of the Visegrád Group [V4], a formal alliance between Check Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia. V4 is the youngest and the least formalised among the existing formal alliances in the EU. Hence, has there been a trend towards a dissolution of formal alliances, the V4 would be the most likely candidate to take such path assuming that the more formalised and institutionalised a structure of governance is the harder it gets to dissolve it.

The analysis of viability of V4 is conceived on two levels. First, the paper investigates the institutional change in structure of V4 from 1999 until present. If the formal alliance is to de-formalise or dissolve, then there should be appropriate structural changes made to this effect and the decisions supporting them recorded accordingly in formal documents. The other level of analysis focuses on the alliance's involvement in the EU, i.e. whether and to what extent has there been cooperation within the EU policy processes. Here, the viability of V4 cooperation is investigated in the course of treaty negotiations (2002/03 Convention on the Future of Europe and 2003/04 and 2007 Intergovernmental Conferences [IGC]) and the negotiations of the Multiannual Financial Framework (2007-13) [Financial Perspective]. These were the two sets of negotiations of highest strategic significance for the EU integration project. Given the significance of these negotiations, the expectation is that if the alliance is viable then there is evidence of its cooperation.

I have obtained data from the formal documents of the V4, media records and a set of interviews with officials from V4 countries from permanent representations (in 2004 as part of my doctoral research), and with V4 government officials in capitals (in February 2011).

² *The Economist*, 6.2.2003: 3.

The characteristics of formal intergovernmental alliances in the EU

This paper defines 'formal intergovernmental alliances' as those that represent a broad array of permanent and formalised bilateral and multilateral government relations outside a domain of a specific set of EU negotiations and even possibly outside the domain of EU affairs (Klemenčič 2006). In practice, various terms have been used in EU studies literature when referring to alliances: 'axis', 'tandem', 'bloc' and 'partnership'. The most prominent cases of formal intergovernmental alliances – that are also active within the EU - include: the Franco-German alliance, the Benelux, the Nordic cooperation, the Baltic Cooperation and the Visegrád Group. The term 'alliance' is thus conceptually different from 'coalition'. A 'coalition' is defined here as any group of states that coordinate their positions and act cooperatively on all or some negotiation issues in a particular negotiation situation.

These alliances have been a target of an extensive scholarly investigation. One body of literature highlights the prominent role of especially the Franco-German and the Benelux alliances in the EU integration project. Helen Wallace argues that part of the 'cement' for deep European integration was derived from bilateral relationships between countries (H Wallace 2001: 5). Philippe de Schoutete similarly points out that the special relationships between the key players acted as catalysts of the integration process (De Schoutete 1990: 121). The special relationship between France and Germany has been seen to be the closest of all bilateral alliances within Europe (De Schoutete 1990: 111) and has 'exerted significant influence on the development of European affairs' (De Schoutete: 121). De Schoutete (1990: 107-108) further describes these "durable, deeper and more organised" relationships as 'sub-systems' within EU polity. They emerge within the European polity if a group of states feels called upon to play a 'collective leadership' role; i.e. it creates a 'directoire'; or if they wish to preserve certain positions already acquired earlier; or wish to forward the integration process in a particular area by the way of 'enhanced cooperation' (ibid.). While the tactical ad hoc coalitions in EU negotiations do not have any lasting influence on the functioning of the European polity, '[t]he negotiation process changes if a particular bilateral coalition becomes a durable and predictable feature (H Wallace 1986a: 156; De Schoutete 1990: 106).

Wallace distinguishes between three forms of bilateral relationships within the EU. The first are relationships where 'pairs of governments engage in dialogue simply because transactions take place which involve these governments directly or indirectly, actually or potentially', but such relationships 'may do no more than respond to events and keep lines of contact open' (H Wallace 1986b: 136). The second form includes relationships where 'governments are condemned to consult and to cooperate, because the volume and the complexity of transactions between the two countries are such that their governments have to appraise the bilateral relationship explicitly' (ibid.). Such transactions relate to historical affinities, trade relations, security ties and membership in the same multilateral organisations (ibid.). The third form of

bilateral relationships refers to the 'special relationships', where two governments 'put their bilateral dealings on to a privileged basis' (H Wallace 1986b: 137). The definition of formal alliances used in this paper comes closest to the third form: the governments make strategic choice to cooperate, they record the agreement in a formal document and they create a structure to facilitate cooperation.

The other of body of literature is predominantly empirically driven and historically oriented which either analyse the role of specific alliances in EU negotiations or investigate the nature of the cooperation more generally. Most of this literature focuses on the origins and development of the Franco-German partnership, addressing the depth and scope of this 'special relationship' (Morgan and Bray 1986; McCarthy 1993; Wood 1995; Kocs 1995; Bulmer and Paterson 1996; Bocquet 1997; Clemens and Paterson 1998; Pedersen 1998; Webber 1999; Hendriks and Morgan 2001; Krotz 2002). Other alliances that have been researched are the Benelux (Bossaert and Vanhoonacker 2000), the Nordic cooperation (Lawler 1997; Miles 1996; Ingebritsen 1998; Arter 1999; Archer 2003; Egeberg 2003) and the role of Spain in the context of the Mediterranean partnership (Aliboni 1990; Closa 1995; Magone 2004). Alliances between the new member states: the Visegrád Group (Davy 1990; Bukalska and Bocian 2003; Dangerfield 2008) and the Baltic cooperation (Ozolina 1999) have been subject to much less research.

However, not all governments are engaged in formal alliances. The UK has been portrayed as a country that cultivates a wide network of informal strategic relationships, and which consistently and typically engages in informal and issue-specific coalitions (J Smith and Tsatsas 2002). J Smith and Tsatsas' concept of 'promiscuous bilateralism' depicts well this peculiar type of a broad-web of informal alliances that may be activated into operational coalitional cooperation when this is perceived to be mutually beneficial. Furthermore, there are also a number of less-researched informal regional groupings, such as the 'Weimar Triangle' of France, Germany and Poland; the 'Regional Partnership' comprising Austria and her Central European neighbours; and the 'Club Med' of the Mediterranean countries. These relationships, as H Wallace and De Schoutheete suggest do not have any lasting influence on the functioning of the European polity, '[t]he negotiation process changes if a particular bilateral coalition becomes a durable and predictable feature (H Wallace 1986a: 156; De Schoutheete 1990: 106).

This paper submits that the most relevant parameters to distinguish between formal intergovernmental alliances are: (i) depth of formalisation of cooperation; and (ii) scope of cooperation (issue-specific or broad-based). What is assumed is that all alliances are characterised by certain permanence implying iterative interactions. They also involve geographically proximate members. With geographic proximity comes in most cases shared historical experience and cultural affinities, as well as shared regional concerns and opportunities for cross-border cooperation.

In terms of depth of cooperation, alliance partners develop the structure of cooperation, i.e. ways of reaching collective decisions, determining the common objectives and - where applicable - the allocation of costs and payoffs. These are recoded in a some formal document

ranging from an international treaty that have direct effects on domestic legislation and subject to ratification procedures (e.g. Benelux, Nordic and Franco-German and Baltic) to a declaration with purely 'declarative character' without being legally binding (e.g. Visegrád Group). What is common for all the formal alliances is that they offer a framework for regular and structured interactions and that these relationships in most cases permeate different levels of the government structures (and often extend also to inter-parliamentary and civil society cooperation). The structures of relationships ensure certain regularity in contacts between the government officials regardless of changes in domestic politics or within the EU and leading to a "routine". In other words, the alliances represent a 'sub-polity' or a 'sub-system' with rules, procedures and norms of appropriateness pertaining to the relationship, as well as a common framework of ideas and shared meanings among the partners (Krotz 2002). However, there are also substantial differences between these formal relationships especially in terms of the scope of cooperation and more importantly what role the relationship has played or sought to play within the EU.

The institutional change in V4

The Visegrád Group was formed in 1991 after the break-down of the communist bloc between (then still) Czechoslovakia, Poland, and Hungary, with the purpose of intensifying mutual cooperation between the three (later four) Central European states. It was motivated in particular by 'the belief that through joint efforts it will be easier to achieve set goals, i.e. to successfully accomplish social transformation and join in European integration'. In the 1991 Visegrád Declaration, the (then) three countries highlighted their similarities in terms of shared aim to institute democracy and a free market economy and get fully involved in the European integration process. The Visegrád Declaration (1991) also reaffirmed that the three neighbouring countries had strong bases for cooperation in the ongoing system of mutual contacts, and a common cultural and spiritual heritage: 'mutual spiritual, cultural and economic influences exerted over a long period of time, resulting from the fact of proximity, can support cooperation based on natural historical development'.

Visegrád Declaration (Visegrád Group 1991) was not subject to ratification and has a purely "declarative character" without being legally binding. In terms of structure, the Declaration (ibid.) stipulates a loose form of intergovernmental cooperation which was not to be exclusive. Concretely, the Declaration states that the cooperation between the Visegrád countries '[will] in no way [...] interfere with or restrict their relations with other countries, and that it will not be directed against the interests of any other party' (ibid.). It was rather sketchy as to the actual structure of coordination: "The cooperation of the signatories will be realized through meetings and consultations held at various levels and in various forms" (ibid.).

Only in 1999, after a period of rather low-key activity, the four countries gave their cooperation a boost by extending and making more specific the scope and structure. The emphasis of the cooperation clearly shifted from rebuilding democratic societies and market economies to work

in pursuit of membership in the EU. The substantive elements of cooperation were extended to include foreign affairs, internal affairs, education, culture, youth and sport, science and technology, infrastructure, environment and cross-border cooperation. Subsequent protocols have added new areas of cooperation (Visegrád Group 2002).

More relevant for our analysis, the 'Contents of Visegrád cooperation' (Visegrád Group 1999) also stipulate a more elaborate – indeed a quasi-institutionalised - structure of the intergovernmental cooperation to cater for these expanded scope of policy areas. The cooperation was to be coordinated by a one-year long chairmanship on a rotating basis (in the order Czech Republic, Poland, Hungary, Slovakia). The Prime Ministers would meet once a year officially in the chairing country and once a year unofficially. The main topics of these meetings were to include the state of V4 cooperation, EU accession talks and strategic questions of Central Europe. Other meetings on the political level were also foreseen: of other Government members "as and when the need arises"; State Secretaries of Foreign Affairs twice a year to prepare the Prime Ministers' meetings and draft recommendations on V4 cooperation; ambassadors in V4 countries at least 4 times a year. In addition, the document mentions the existence of Visegrád Co-ordinators within each government responsible for reviewing and co-ordinating the co-operation, preparation of the state secretaries' and prime ministers' meetings. Finally, the document suggests that co-operation on other levels of state and civil society will be encouraged. It was, hence, with this document that V4 cooperation was upgraded into a formal alliance; albeit, the least formalised and institutionalised among formal alliances in the EU.

The Annex to the Content of Visegrád Cooperation (Visegrád Group 2002) clarified few important points regarding the role of the Presidency in operationalizing the cooperation. First, for meetings at any level that were to include also third country or countries, the Presidency was required to discuss any initiative initially within the V4 alone; only after the proposal was to be presented to a third country. Hence, this point affirmed the pre-eminence of V4 to any V4+ constellation. Second, expert consultations at the level of departments of individual ministries could be called at any time by any V4 country and needed not to take place in the presiding country. Also, the ministries themselves organize cooperation between individual ministries. These two additions institutionalised the already existing norms of interactions among the officials.³

In 2004, in wake of EU accession, the four countries reiterated their commitment to cooperate and fine-tuned the areas of cooperation including those within the EU - as well as reaffirmed the existing the structure of cooperation (Visegrád Group 2004a,b). While there was no major institutional change, the affirmation speaks of the viability of cooperation; that is there was no sign of loosening or deformalising the alliance. For example, occasional informal meetings of Primer Ministers and Foreign Ministers before international events were now included in the document. Also, meetings of other ministers and intensified communication of V4 national co-ordinators and their key role in internal and inter-state co-ordination were highlighted. There

³ Interviews: PR#13, 18.11.2004; PR#21, 20.9.2004; PR#23, 17.9.2004.

were two novelties: the Visegrád Fund (which was established in 2000 to foster the civic dimension of V4 cooperation) and its structures were now explicitly mentioned as mechanisms of cooperation. Also, meeting of Presidents of V4 countries was institutionalised. The decision was, thus, to retain the formal, but rather unbinding, structure of Visegrád alliance. There have been no further formal institutional changes made formally since. The Bratislava Declaration at the occasion of 20th anniversary of V4 (Visegrád Group 2011) states only that the V4 “has become a well-established brand and a respected partner”. Informally, however, there has been an understanding between the four countries in the wake of their EU precedencies that when either of them assumes the role of the Presidency to the EU Council, the other three countries would help it to defend its national interests given that as a norm the presiding country has to be impartial.⁴

Also, the Bratislava Declaration (Visegrád Group 2011) reaffirms that V4 is “open to cooperation [...] with countries and other regional groupings through the V4+ format” (ibid.). The V4+ format has become an important dimension ever since 2000. As demonstrated in the Annex 2, the V4 representatives held several meetings on highest political levels with Benelux, the UK, and with Austria and Slovenia in the framework of the Regional Partnership during the treaty negotiations and with Romania and Bulgaria especially on issues pertaining regional development after these countries accession to the EU. The V4 Prime Ministers’ statement in 2001 highlights “the external dimension of V4 cooperation” (Visegrád Group 2001); explicating, however, that V4 treats these relationships just as informal and irregular bilateral relationships on issues of common concern while protecting the ‘internal dimension’ of the V4 by agreeing on V4 positions before contacting third parties (see Visegrád Group 2002). In the words of the Slovak Foreign Minister: “The success of the V4 depends on our ability to continuously seek common meeting points and to look at our cooperation as a launch platform for seeking additional allies. Our goal is not to create new blocks within the EU, to splinter EU integration or to weaken its unity. After all, it was our EU membership which gave a significant kick to intensifying V4 cooperation”.⁵

While the formal provisions paint a picture of small – even if not insignificant – institutional change, they do not present a complete account of terms and scope of V4 cooperation. The interviews I have conducted with V4 government representatives in 2004 and 2011 testify of dramatic increase in interactions between the four countries’ administrations already before the accession; i.e. during the accession negotiations, the first set of treaty negotiations and in preparation of the Financial Perspective negotiations.⁶ These interactions even extended in frequency and scope after the accession.⁷ While the meetings of Prime Ministers and Foreign Ministers remained fixed and those of sectorial ministers’ relatively steady, there was a dramatic increase of meetings and consultations on technical level and lower political levels.⁸ These

⁴ Interview NG#3, 18.2.2011.

⁵ Interview with Slovak Foreign Affairs Minister Mikuláš Dzurinda: Balogová, B. (2010) “Visegrad spirit will resonate within the EU”. *The Slovak Spectator*. 13.12.2010.

⁶ Interviews: PR#13, 18.11.2004; PR#21, 20.9.2004; PR#23, 17.9.2004.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

would take place in particular in preparation for the Council working group meetings, where the bulk of policy formulation actually takes place (Beyers and Dierickx 1998; that is also the case for IGC see Stubb (2002) suggesting that 95% of issues gets settled in prenegotiations).⁹ During the time of intensive pre-negotiations the officials on technical level are likely to be in contact daily or at least several times in a week.¹⁰ Also, it is common that in the Council working groups the Presidency turns to V4 as a group asking what their position on particular issue is.¹¹

The V4 in the Convention on the Future of Europe, the IGC 2003-04 and the Multiannual Financial Framework (2007-2013) negotiations

The treaty negotiations started in 2002 with the Convention on the Future of Europe, continued with the 2003/04 IGC and 2007 IGC resulting in the Lisbon Treaty. They overlapped with the negotiations concerning the EU's multi-annual financial framework for the period 2007–13 (called Financial Perspective), which started in 2003 and were concluded in 2006. Both sets of negotiations are of fundamental strategic significance for the integration project. Treaty negotiations comprise a whole array of constitutional issues emerging from the definition of the EU institutional architecture and constitutional lines of orientation and policy direction (Elgström and MH Smith 2000: 678-679; Hayes-Renshaw and Wallace 1997: 8). Negotiations on a multi-annual financial framework tackle three main questions: the overall amount of the EU budget; which country contributes how much; and annual ceiling for all major budget provisions (Begg 2005: 14).

There were two main characteristics for the V4 cooperation during these negotiations. First, in both sets of negotiations, V4 acted unified, however not autonomous. In the treaty negotiations, the V4 joined the "Friends of the Community Method" and Poland eventually - towards the end of the Convention and during the IGC - drifted away to form an issue-coalition with Spain, and during the 2007 IGC secured for several specific legal opt-outs: from the Charter of Fundamental Rights, and the delay in the entry into force of double-majority voting until 2017. In the Financial Perspective negotiations, V4 joined the "Friends of the Cohesion" opposing the British rebate and focusing on increasing the share of regional aid. Again, in the final negotiation rounds each state basically negotiated on its own. Poland traded support for the winning proposal on lump-sum compensation payments for side-payments amounting to 1 billion Euro to take account of the zloty exchange rate over 2007-2013 and 206 mil EUR for the five Polish regions where GDP per inhabitant is the lowest in the EU25. Hungary and the Czech Republic were also restored some previously cut aid, and Slovakia was offered funds for the decommission of their nuclear plants.

⁹ Interview NG#3, 18.2.2011.

¹⁰ Interview NG#2, 17.2.2011.

¹¹ Interview NG#3, 18.2.2011.

The bulk of preparatory work for both negotiations has been, however, undertaken through consultations within the V4. Also the decision on joining the both coalitions of “Friends” was reached within the V4.¹² For the V4 government EU negotiations are characterised by high transaction costs and uncertainty in terms of issues and various actors’ interests. This is due to relative novelty in EU. For the three small states within the V4 both - the transaction costs and uncertainty - are even higher due to the relative smallness of their administrations. Formal alliance is for them an important source of intelligence and training on issues concerning their EU operations. If one is to inquire about the importance of V4 cooperation a government representative from the highest political levels, one is to get the citation from one of the V4 declarations with adding that it is a ‘launch platform for seeking additional allies’. If one poses the same question to the officials at the technical level, they tend to respond “we talk to each other almost every day”.¹³

Second, the media reported of major crisis of cooperation due to an internal dispute. In early 2002, a Prime Ministerial Summit was scheduled to take place in Budapest to discuss – among other issues – also the EU proposals for farm and regional subsidies for the acceding states, which was a salient issue for all four countries. The Czech Republic and Slovakia, however, opted not to attend the Summit due to “remarks by Victor Urban, the Hungarian Prime Minister, suggesting that the Benes decrees were incompatible with EU membership.”¹⁴ Hence, amidst several simultaneous negotiations of key strategic importance (accession plus both sets of negotiations); there was effectively a break of relations on the highest political level among the V4 until the elections in Hungary the same year that resulted in change of government. While such disputes do not necessarily break the dense networks of interactions on lower governmental levels, they nevertheless raise “opportunity costs” in the sense of full utilization of the alliance and sour the “spirit” of cooperation among the officials.

The resentment stayed on the highest political level, however. The technical level official reported continuous interactions which did not change either with the adverse stances of their leadership in endgame negotiations or with changes in the party political families in the governments and the animosities or affinities stemming from these among the top political leaders.¹⁵ Similarly, all other factors most often mentioned as an obstacle to a viable V4 cooperation, i.e. Poland’s size and aspirations as a large state in the EU; different geographic orientations towards the neighbouring regions; Poland’s military participation in Iraq; do not present obfuscate the relations on the technical and lower political level of administrations to the same extent that this is the case on the highest political level – especially in view of the attention that media dedicates to that level. Poland’s size of administration and relatively higher number of officials in the EU institutions is seen as an important resource that Poland brings to the consultation tables. In the words of two government representatives from two smaller V4 states: “Poland is always much better informed than any of us. They have extremely effective

¹² Interviews: PR#13, 18.11.2004; PR#21, 20.9.2004; PR#23, 17.9.2004.

¹³ Interviews: NG#1, 18.2.2011; NG#2, 17.2.2011; NG#3, 18.2.2011; NG#4, 22.2.2011.

¹⁴ Financial Times, 23-24.2.2002.

¹⁵ Interview NG#1, 18.2.2011.

information channels. We appreciate getting information. It helps us in our own decision making.”¹⁶ The same interviewees reported that Poland indeed proposes the majority of the policy initiatives within the V4, but that this is not seen as necessary the problem by the other three. The advantages in terms of information resources, learning and “being taken more seriously by the Commission and others if acting as a group” clearly speak in favour of cooperation on this level. In addition, the officials report of “knowing each other well” and “having more things in common to discuss informally” as other reasons why they interact also informally.¹⁷ The only consequence of the experiences in both sets of negotiations – and the accession negotiations¹⁸ - and perhaps also due to the dispute was in not taking active steps towards at least some further institutionalization of the alliance, e.g. establishing a Secretariat.

The “pragmatic formal alliances” – such as the V4, the Baltic cooperation, the Nordic cooperation– cooperate in negotiation coalitions when and until this seems the right strategic choice in terms of their cost-payoff calculations. They might not even emerge as a visible autonomous coalition in specific negotiations, as it was the case with V4 in both sets of negotiations. It is perhaps only for the Franco-German (and perhaps the Benelux) alliance that active coalitional cooperation in EU negotiations of such strategic importance as the treaty and financial perspective negotiations is almost an ‘an existential question’. Had they not decided (or managed) to cooperate in such important negotiations, the effectiveness or purpose of the alliance as such might be put under question. They have the legacy (and the corresponding burden of expectation to act) as ‘leadership alliances’ in the European integration project. Hence, they tend to be compelled to active coalitional cooperation in key negotiations to nurture the integration process.

Conclusion

So are the formal alliances disappearing in the EU? The case of V4 answers negatively. This paper argues that the strength of cooperation within formal alliances is not to be evaluated based on their coalitional cooperation in the end games of EU negotiations, which tend to attract most popular attention. This paper, thus, seeks to shift the questions related to viability of formal alliances from the end-game of EU negotiations to the day-to-day interactions between the lower-end of the government hierarchy, i.e. the government representatives at the technical and lower political level – this is where the vast majority of EU policy agenda is set and majority of policy formulations are agreed upon in the pre-negotiations within the Council working groups (this is the case even for the IGCs, see Stubb 2002).

This level testifies of a high frequency and intensity of interactions between the officials, for both consultation purposes and more often than not for purposes of intra-V4 negotiations of

¹⁶ Interviews: NG#1, 18.2.2011; NG#2, 17.2.2011; NG#3, 18.2.2011; PR#13, 18.11.2004.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ During the accession negotiations the group was largely split up by the ‘regatta approach’ of the Commission which pitted the candidate countries against each other (Avery 1995, Avery and Cameron 1998).

common positions to be later launched in EU negotiations. At this level especially, formal alliance serves as the source of and platform for upgrading information resources and expertise on policy issues as well as processes and institutional setting of negotiations. These resources are in situation of imperfect information and uncertainty that all V4 countries experience due to their relative novelty in the EU (and the three small one also due to their limited administrative capabilities) fundamental for effective decision making. But these level interactions do not remain only on the level of consultation, but tend to lead to agreements on common positions in the EU negotiations. In other words, formal alliances appear as another level of the negotiation game, where not only governments' strategic choices are formulated, but also their preferences shaped and often their 'win-sets' defined.

This adds a new thinking to the prominent account of 'two-level games' by Putnam (1988) which has influenced most of the recent literature on EU negotiations. My argument goes that next to the domestic constituencies and EU-level negotiations, as depicted by Putnam (1988), governments involved in formal alliances also simultaneously negotiate with their alliance partners. The domestic games define the 'win-sets' of possible agreements, i.e. those agreements that are ratifiable domestically (Putnam 1988: 435-442). The government negotiators care about domestic opinion because they wish to be re-elected and because (often) the EU agreements need to be ratified (as in the case of constitutional issues). The intra-alliance negotiations too can define the 'win-sets' of possible agreements. These would typically take into consideration the broad values shared by the alliance as well as bottom-lines of the alliance partners.

While the iterative interactions among alliance partners alone are not a sufficient condition for active coalitional cooperation within EU negotiations, the propensity to such cooperation is high given established personal contacts, channels of information, mutual understanding and trust. In fact, all V4 countries report the V4 to be in the first circle of countries they draw their coalitional partners from. The alliance partners are in most cases the most 'convenient' coalitional partners due to the low transaction costs of cooperation. In addition, collectively, the V4 countries as a group have the same voting weight as France and Germany combined.

This article posits that patterns of reiterated communication and interaction among the lower-level government officials help develop the polity-like structure within the alliance as well as a sort of a common identity. The stronger the sense of belonging to the alliance, and the stronger the commitment and loyalty to this relationship, the higher is the expectation, in fact "path dependency" to future cooperation. As Krotz (2002: 2) notes, these intergovernmental practices 'standardize and routinize the conduct of a single state involved in the relations', 'bind and cultivate personnel', and 'generate and perpetuate social meaning and purpose, such as the meaning of normality and normal expectations'. This expectation is reinforced by the fact that the transaction costs of coordinated action among alliance partners tend to be lower than the costs of coordination with other governments with whom similar ties have not been built. Hence, such an option may appear the most 'convenient' provided that interests are loosely convergent, even if they are not perfectly convergent.

Finally, formal alliances when acting as autonomous coalitions in EU negotiations tend to be popularly seen as making the negotiation process more difficult and lowering the levels of common negotiated agreements since their bargaining tends to be more positional (as opposed to integrative). Again, this might be indeed true in the end-game of negotiation processes. However, looking the agenda-setting process and pre-negotiations their cooperation is –in fact – tremendously contributing to the efficiency of the decision-making. They fill in information shortages, settle misunderstandings and process the material amongst themselves before they come to the meetings within the Council and with the Commission.

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Appendix 1

An overview of the structural characteristics of formal alliances in the EU (Klemenčič 2006)

	<i>Benelux</i>	<i>Franco-German</i>	<i>Nordic Council of Ministers</i>	<i>Baltic Council of Ministers</i>	<i>Visegrád Group</i>
Legal bases of the cooperation	Treaty Establishing the Benelux Economic Union (1958) subsequently extended through various protocols on new areas of cooperation. The new Benelux Treaty (2008).	Elysée Treaty (1963, 1988 Protocols and 2003 Declaration).	Treaty of Cooperation between Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden (the Helsinki Treaty) (1962, subsequently amended in 1972 when the Council of Ministers was established and in 1974, 1983, 1985, 1991, 1993, 1995 and 2001).	The Agreement between the Republic of Estonia, the Republic of Latvia and the Republic of Lithuania on Interparliamentary and Intergovernmental Cooperation between the Baltic States (1994, 2003 Protocol) and 'Terms of Reference for the Baltic Council of Ministers (1994, amended in 2003). The Agreement needed to be ratified by all the parliaments as well as any protocols added.	The Declaration of cooperation between Czech and Slovak Federal Republics, the Republic of Poland and the Republic of Hungary (1991); Contents of Visegrád Cooperation (2001); Declaration on Visegrád Cooperation (2004). Both signed by the Prime Ministers, not binding to ratification by the Parliaments.
Highest legislative body/bodies	Committee of Ministers (all government ministers responsible for different policies).	Joint Ministerial Councils: Franco-German Defence and Security Council; Franco-German Economic and Financial Council and Franco-German Environmental Council.	Nordic Council of Ministers (Prime Ministers level) and Ministers for Nordic Cooperation and the Nordic Committee for Cooperation. Nordic Council of Ministers consists of almost 20 individual councils.	Baltic Council of Ministers and Baltic Assembly, i.e. the Baltic Council which meets annually.	Meeting of Prime Minister (not a body).
Other institutions and bodies	Council of Economic Union, Benelux Court of Justice Committees and working groups (responsible for implementation).	Franco-German Youth Office, Franco-German High Cultural Council, ARTE cultural television network, Franco-German university.	Committee of Senior Officials responsible for implementation. More than 30 joint Nordic institutions.	Co-operation Council of the Baltic Council of Ministers Praesidium of Baltic Assembly Expert committees of both institutions.	Visegrád Fund for support of projects related to regional cooperation in youth, culture, education and research in particular.
Interparliamentary cooperation	Yes - Interparliamentary Consultative Council ('Benelux Parliament') strictly consultative with own secretariat and two advisory bodies: the Economic and Social Committee and the College of Arbitrators.	Franco-German Friendship Group at the Bundesrat and the Senate of the French Republic (no legislative function); regular interparliamentary meetings.	Nordic Council established in 1952 and has own institutions: the Plenary Assembly, the Presidium and Standing Committees.	Baltic Assembly established in 1991 and has a Presidium.	Regular communication between parliaments, no formal cooperation.
Independent secretariat	Yes - 60 permanent civil servants in Brussels.	No; each governments has appointed a Commissioner for Franco-German	Yes - based in Copenhagen with around 100 staff and headed by Secretary-General.	No - rotating Secretariat held by the Presidency.	No - There are also Visegrád coordinators in each administration responsible for

		Cooperation: on the German side the Minister of State for Europe at the Federal Foreign Office, and the Minister for Europe in France.			cooperation (they met twice a year).
Financial independence	Yes – annual budget prepared by the Secretary General and confirmed by the Committee of Ministers. The budget of the General Secretariat for 2006 is 6.484.000 €, 48,5% is paid by the Netherlands and Belgium and 3% is paid by Luxemburg. ¹⁹	No - Both countries co-finance joint institutions.	Yes – apx. 107 mio EUR annually.	No.	No – only for the Visegrád Fund (each country contributes 1.5 mio EUR per year).
Presidency	Yes- 6-month rotating Chair of the Committee.	No.	Yes – rotating annually.	Yes – rotating annually.	Yes – rotating annually.

¹⁹ This data has been obtained from an official from the Benelux Secretariat through e-mail correspondence, 25 July 2006.

Appendix 2

List of Ministerial Meetings and V4+ meetings from 2000-2010 (collated by the author from <http://www.Visegrádgroup.eu> [Last visited 20 February 2011])

	Meetings of Sectorial Ministers/State Secretaries	V4+ meetings
2010	8	Min of Agriculture + Bul, Ro., Extended V4 FM summit + B3, eastern partnership, Belgium, Spain, EC; Min of spatial planning + Bul, Ro.
2009	8	FMs + Japan; FMs + Sweden; Min of Agriculture + Bul, Ro.
2008	7	FMs + Sweden, Ukraine; Min Regional Development + Romania, Bulgaria; PM + President France; PMs V4+B3; FMs + BUL, RO, SWE, B3
2007	9	FMs+Japan; PMs+ Portugal; PMs + Slovenia; PMs V4+Baltic
2006	7	FMs + Benelux before EC; FM +Romania+Bulgaria; FMs +Baltic; Min Regional Development + Romania, Bulgaria;
2005	9	PMs +Benelux (2x); PMs +UK; PMs +EC President; PMs +Austria and Slovenia; FM Regional Partnership + Ukraine; PMs + Ukraine; National coordinators + Benelux; European Min + Lithuania
2004	19	Finance Min +USA; Education Min + Slovenia; Summit V4+Benelux;
2003	15	MFA State Sec + UK;
2002	9	R&D Ministers+Slovenia; Colloquium on future of Europe+Benelux, Summit+Benelux; State Secretaries +Ukraine; Health Min + Slovenia, Austria, Ukraine; Deputy FM +UK
2001	9	Summit V4+Benelux, Interior +Austria; Youth Ministry + Slovenia;
2000	9	PM+Germany, PM +France, Interior Ministry+ Austria; FM+Slovenia;

