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Small States in the European Union: The Case of Slovakia

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Citation
Šuchterová, S. (2023). *Small States in the European Union: The Case of Slovakia*.

Version:	Not Applicable (or Unknown)
License:	License to inclusion and publication of a Bachelor or Master Thesis, 2023
Downloaded from:	https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3642684

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Universiteit Leiden

Small States in the European Union:

The Case of Slovakia

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MA Thesis International Relations – European Union Studies

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Date of submission: 06/06/2023

Word count: 15000

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1. Introduction

Before the 2004 enlargement of the European Union, Slovakia had been referred to as one of the "awkward" states (Field 2000). Due to many internal political issues, it failed to meet the democratic criteria for joining the EU during their first application (Field 2000). While being reluctant to comply with EU policies on economy and human rights, Slovakia was considered as lacking progress and its potential membership was therefore viewed as upsetting (Field 2000, 130-131). Nevertheless, after managing to join the EU in 2004, the tables have turned and Slovakia has been declared as "the unlikely success story" (Nic, Slobodnik and Simecka 2014). The newcomer state indeed benefitted from rapid economic growth, while effectively engaging with different policy areas (Nic, Slobodnik and Simecka 2014).

Slovakia has been categorised as a small state. Although there is no general definition for small states, they are most frequently defined based on their resources, population size, and relative power. Due to Slovakia's small size of land, population of roughly 5.5 million, and its limited power within the EU, it classifies as a small state. The number of small states in the EU increased especially in the most recent enlargements, but they eventually became disadvantaged in shaping different EU policies because of their diminished bargaining powers (Panke 2010, 799). Nevertheless, it can be argued that small states will gain on their importance over time, and their participation in the political spectrum progressively matters, since their amount is increasing. With the following research question, *What strategies do small states use to impact the policy-making process in the European Union?*, it will be traced whether Slovakia managed to do so.

The way in which scholars study small states both in and outside the EU is predominantly by focusing on their "capabilities" (Neumann and Gstohl 2006, 17). Beyond that, they analyse what types of power they have and how they can use it to bargain (Neumann and Gstohl 2006, 19). The general view of the system proposes that the "great powers" are the responsible ones or those in charge, and that small states should be studied in light of negotiations with them (Neumann and Gstohl 2006, 19). However, these "great powers" have always been a minority in the system, and the focus was laying on them due to being mainstream in international relations, while small states remained unnoticed for a long time (Neumann and Gstohl 2006, 21-22). Therefore, it is crucial to analyse some of the less frequently mentioned small states (especially from Central Eastern Europe), to be able to shift the lens.

Due to the rising importance of the debate on small states, many more scholars have been engaging with the topic in the last decades. There has been a considerable amount of

literature written about the Baltic states, especially Lithuania, but also Finland or Sweden, which successfully traced the relative power which these states have, and the ways in which they impact the policy-making in the EU in different policy areas, considering their capacities and vulnerabilities (e.g. see Arter 2000; Kmieliauskaite 2017; Lamoreaux and Galbreath 2008). However, when zooming in, some countries such as Slovakia have not been discussed, despite their rising importance.

It is relevant to look closer at the case of Slovakia, not only to fill in the gap, but also because through analysing another post-soviet state, one will be able to understand how these states operate and what their aims or techniques are after joining international organisations. This thesis will add new data to the field and identify if the powers of small states are truly limited or can increase their capacity over time, for example by creating an alliance or coalition with other member states. By answering the research question, this thesis will build on the existing work in this field.

The existing research often analyses the resources that small states use, the issues that they focus on, and whether they have a convening power and can bring other states together to discuss a specific topic or question, and what networks they utilise to do so. Arguably, most of the small states tend to use their regional groupings (such as the V4, Benelux, the Baltic states, Nordics, Nordic-Baltic Eight, Bucharest Nine, etc.), but these can also cooperate to build blocs. As part of the research findings chapter, this thesis will also aim to investigate how Slovakia utilises the Visegrad Group (a political and cultural alliance of four states from Central Europe) and under what circumstances it is impactful on EU policies, as one of its options.

When it comes to specific data, this research will be based on an analysis of both primary and secondary sources. These were selected based on previous research of other scholars, and the same approach will be replicated since it is the most reliable way to study small states. The case study and the data will be analysed by using process tracing together with triangulation, to get the most accurate results. As the selected sources are mainly written text, this qualitative method is the most suitable one since it allows one to focus on the main themes in the broader context, and the relative impact can be easily traced.

To sum up, this thesis will be structured in the following way. First, a literature review will acknowledge the existing literature and identify some gaps. The following chapter will introduce the research design, while describing the case of Slovakia, chosen data, and methodology in detail. The method of process tracing and triangulation were successfully applied to other cases, therefore it is the logical next step to apply it to a new case study.

Moreover, a background chapter explaining the story of Slovakia's success in the EU will be included too. The main part of this thesis, the analysis, will be divided into three parts according to the content. Lastly, after answering the research question, the research will be summarised and placed within a broader debate on small states and their impact on the EU policy-making process.

2. Literature Review

The debate about small states has been growing in importance especially after the 2004 enlargement of the EU. Slovakia, being one of the countries of this enlargement, has not been widely discussed as a case study, especially when it comes to the specific mechanisms and tools which are being used to influence EU policies. Therefore, the following research question, *What strategies do small states use to impact the policy-making process in the European Union?,* will be adopted for this literature review, with the purpose of analysing the existing secondary sources on the topic of small states in the EU, as well as Slovakia's accession to the EU. The literature review will be divided into 4 subsections: (1) defining small states, (2) small states in the EU, (3) Slovakia in the EU, and (4) conclusions.

2.1 Defining Small States

The scholarly debate about small states has been growing since there was an increase in newly created states, and most of them are small (Baehr 1975, 457). Many international bodies are now increasingly paying attention to small states (Crowards 2002, 144). However, there is not only one way of defining small states; there are many different definitions, distinct categories, and so far, there has been no consensus on one specific definition, since different studies describe it in various ways and they are difficult to generalise (Crowards 2002, 143; Maass 2009, 65; Baehr 1975). Due to no agreement, the concept of small states is continuously seen as contested (Thorhallsson and Wivel 2006, 652). While this can be seen as a limitation to the research, Maass (2009, 66) argues that the research on small states benefits precisely from the different ways of defining a small state, as it offers more flexibility within the field.

Most of the scholars mention size as one of the main factors in defining the concept (Baehr 1975; Crowards 2002; Katzenstein 2003; Maass 2009). Many studies claim that the way states behave in the international relations arena can be explained when focusing on the size of states (Baehr 1975, 457). Nevertheless, most scholars use the term slightly differently in their research. Crowards (2002, 143) shows in his analysis that most of the definitions are focused on population size, sparingly connected with land area and total income. It is further described how the three factors (population size, land area, total income) are varied across the existing literature, and how the authors use different numbers to define these (Crowards 2002). Moreover, Katzenstein (2003, 10) argues that the context is important, he compares large states with small states, and defines them according to the size of territory and scale of their operations. He claims that specifically among small European states, partnership is essential

especially on the economic side, but later he demonstrates that political strategy is more important than economic outcome (Katzenstein 2003, 25).

Similarly to the approach of Crowards (2002), Maass (2009) identifies complementary characteristics of a small state which are size of population, size of economy, and geographical size. He suggests that the notion of small state can be best understood as a political term, and he analyses multiple scholars to compare where the cut-off point for the population size criterion has been set – it varies from 1 million to 10-15 million (Maass 2009, 75-76). The author also states that the existence of small states as a peculiar category is generally accepted for usage despite no existing consensus about the determinants of their size (Maass 2009, 70).

On the other hand, in his article, Baehr (1975, 466) argues that the concept is insufficient as an analytical tool and that the category of small states is too broad for an analysis. He explains this by the fact that after WWII, size was crucial in determining whether a certain state would become independent or not, and combines this with political and economic part, however now the size of different states relates to viability and stability (Baehr 1975, 458). Nevertheless, small states do not necessarily have to be defined in such way, the category can also be established by their behaviour such as working through international organisations, rejection of use of force, and so on (Maass 2009, 79).

2.2 Small States in the EU

Another way of looking at small states more specifically is to analyse how they seek to influence the EU. Already after WWII, the changing world order offered small states new alternatives, especially protection by multilateral institutions, and recognition by the international community through the UN (Bailes and Thorhallsson 2012, 100). In the EU institutions, small states try to push for their own interest, and they usually emphasise positive influence (Thorhallsson and Wivel 2006, 659).

The recent enlargements changed the balance between small and large states in the EU (Thorhallsson and Wivel 2006, 651). Through these enlargements, the number of small states increased, and small states ended up being disadvantaged in shaping EU policies due to limited bargaining power and financial resources (Panke 2010, 799). Thorhallsson and Wivel (2006, 653) try to define small states in the EU as those who are not great powers, and by population size. Also, they still argue that larger states have better chances of influencing EU integration (Thorhallsson and Wivel 2006, 658). Different scholars participating in the debate are adding to each other's work by presenting new types of evidence. Panke (2010, 800) builds up on the argument of Thorhallsson and Wivel (2006) and reveals in her research that some small states

are more active than others. She agrees that small states generally have lower bargaining and voting capacities, but the older the small state is, the more active it is (Panke 2010, 812-813). Nasra (2011, 165) also argues that small states can be as well positioned as the large powerful states. They can easily become active, but it depends on the policy area (Nasra 2011, 168). The influence of small states mostly depends on their commitment, network capital and other immaterial resources (Nasra 2011, 177).

Some scholars can be merged in one group according to the way they define small states through looking at the operation in the Council (Bailes and Thorhallsson 2012; Panke 2010; Thorhallsson and Wivel 2006). Panke (2010, 800) defines small states in the EU according to the distribution of votes in Qualified Majority Voting (QMV) in the Council. Furthermore, it has been previously analysed that the institutional changes in the Council had an impact on small states, since the extension of QMV weakened small states when it comes to decision-making in the EU (Thorhallsson and Wivel 2006, 660-661). Adding to this, Bailes and Thorhallsson (2012, 108) state that QMV does not help small states in the Council, because the number of votes is calculated in a way to make it hard for them to block the large states. When it comes to the rotating presidency of the Council, it puts pressure on small states too, together with other factors such as Euroscepticism (Thorhallsson and Wivel 2006, 662; Panke 2010, 808). Still, already the accession process to the EU put pressure on small states to accept the norms of the EU before their entry (Bailes and Thorhallsson 2012, 112).

Most of the existing literature focuses on a specific EU policy field when it comes to the small states activism. Scholars prefer to investigate the security area, as it is known that the influence of small states on security policy is small (Thorhallsson and Wivel 2006, 659). Bailes and Thorhallsson (2012) analyse the membership of regional institutions and security strategies of small states. They argue that small states have created their different strategies in order to promote human rights, environment, innovation, to show loyalty to the protector (the EU), and to share common issues (Bailes and Thorhallsson 2012, 103). However, when small states join the EU to get protection, they are in risk of identity erosion (Bailes and Thorhallsson 2012, 110).

When it comes to different groupings and alliances of small states, scholars argue that with the increase of small states, potential for alliances within the EU increased too, especially on issues where they have common interest (Thorhallsson and Wivel 2006, 664). Nevertheless, this resulted in the big members starting to meet informally instead of through formal institutions (Thorhallsson and Wivel 2006, 664). Indeed, whether states engage at all depends

on developing their national positions on time and whether they include expertise, but small states have to prepare to deal with structural disadvantages in daily negotiations besides that (Panke 2010, 806-807). Nasra (2011, 167) further deepens the existing research by mentioning both formal and informal groups or networks in which states organise and applies the framework to the EU foreign policy. All in all, whether and how a small state participates in a specific policy area depends on the national importance and preferences (Nasra 2011, 177).

2.3 Slovakia in the EU

Firstly, it is necessary to acknowledge that in the literature, there are two sides present to the debate about Slovakia's readiness to join the EU as part of the 2004 enlargement. While some argue that Slovakia was not fully ready to join the EU (see Pridham 2002), others generally introduce Slovakia as an 'unlikely success story' of the 2004 enlargement (Nic, Slobodnik and Simecka 2014, 1). For the purpose of this thesis, it is only relevant to focus on the second group in order to be able to effectively assess the performance of Slovakia.

After joining the EU, Slovakia experienced rapid economic growth and was mainly benefiting from European integration (Nic, Slobodnik and Simecka 2014, 3). In the early years of membership, national diplomacy was focused on being fully able to participate in the internal market, Schengen area and Eurozone (Rybar 2011, 166). Furthermore, as a small country, Slovakia always supported a strong role for the European Commission (Nic, Slobodnik and Simecka 2014, 12).

Previously, it has been analysed by some scholars whether the policy preferences of Slovakia differ when comparing the pre- and post-enlargement period (Nic, Slobodnik and Simecka 2014; Rybar 2011; Haughton and Malova 2007). In general, most of the national preferences are not socioeconomic (family, JHA, neighbourhood); the economic preferences are only related to energy policy and taxation (Rybar 2011, 165). Haughton and Malova (2007, 6) provide an explanation for the preferences which considers Slovakia's history and its size together with the structure of party politics. Moreover, it has been identified that the public opinion in Slovakia is relatively important, especially when it comes to enlargement, integration in CFSP, and fiscal domain (Haughton and Malova 2007, 13). Regarding reaching the policy preferences, Slovakia was able to build effective coalitions through the regional grouping of V4 in different policy areas (Nic, Slobodnik and Simecka 2014, 13).

Although the scholarship typically identifies the same policy areas, some of them describe them more specifically than others. Nic, Slobodnik and Simecka (2014) identified that the most important policy areas for Slovakia are specifically EU enlargement, energy sector,

and European neighbourhood policy. Additionally, Rybar (2011, 161) argues that while EU membership exerts administrative and political burdens on the states, it also provides them an opportunity to effectively develop new initiatives together with other states. This is exactly the case of Slovakia, whose major initiative (together with Czech Republic) was to set up the European Nuclear Energy Forum (Rybar 2011, 166). The author found out that the nuclear energy sector is one of the key policy interests of Slovakia, since Slovakia even aimed to secure the energy portfolio for its commissioner (Rybar 2011, 168).

Slovakia is often seen as an important player in the field of enlargement and the neighbourhood policy in the Western Balkans and Eastern Europe regions (Nic, Slobodnik and Simecka 2014, 12). The country played an active role in the Eastern Partnership - during the V4 presidency, Slovakia put forward this initiative, even though engaging only in the international field, and this issue was domestically almost absent in politics (Rybar 2011, 168). Arguably, Slovakia pushed for this partnership under the ENP due to its historical ties to the region of Eastern Europe, and shared culture and identity with other Slavic countries (Rybar 2011, 169).

2.4 Conclusions

In conclusion, this literature review was centred around the debate on small states and progressed to the chosen case study of Slovakia. The aim of this thesis is to contribute to the debate on small states, specifically on small states impacting the EU policy-making process through different mechanisms and tools, providing a new in-depth analysis of this case study.

3. Research Design

This chapter is going to explain why the specific case and data were chosen, and how they were consulted, while it will also introduce the method called "Process Tracing" and triangulation. This method will help to analyse the impact of small states on EU policy-making. Process tracing is a suitable method for this research which will allow for covering a larger set of data in order to investigate how small states operate in the EU. This chapter is necessary to understand the choices of the author within the topic as well as the research findings of this thesis later.

3.1 Case Selection

This thesis will be centred around the case study of Slovakia. As this is a single case study, this thesis will adopt a within-case design. The motivation to write about Slovakia is related to the fact that many scholars have overlooked this case in their research about small states, and the country is generally understudied. The most prominent cases in the literature include the Northern states, such as Finland or Sweden, but also the Baltic states, especially Lithuania and Latvia (see Arter 2000; Bjorkdahl 2008; Kmieliauskaite 2017; Kronsell 2002; Lamoreaux and Galbreath 2008). Thus, it represents an interesting new case to look at. Apart from that, Slovakia was also chosen due to the competencies of the author, such as personal interest and language ability which will be useful when analysing the data in their original language.

When it comes to these authors, some of them chose their case studies based on the fact that their cases were previously overlooked, but also because it was possible to trace their action quite well, since those countries managed to come up with some innovative products (such as the Northern Dimension Initiative in case of Finland, promotion of conflict prevention in Sweden, or even Sweden being active in environmental policy) and made an impact on EU policy-making through setting new norms (Arter 2000, 679; Bjorkdahl 2008, 136; Kronsell 2002, 288). Others chose their cases based on the participatory role of the states in the region (eg. the Baltic states actively supporting the political transition in the post-Soviet region and focusing on one specific area) or on their shift of the political weakness caused by transition from soviet occupation towards exercising more power post-Lisbon (Lamoreaux and Galbreath 2008, 8; Kmieliauskaite 2017, 21). All these cases relate to particular problems in their respective timeframes and the authors chose these to challenge the assumptions about small states having no influence on EU policy-making. The case of Slovakia fits well in this debate, and it is part of a broader class of events in the policy-making area in the EU. Therefore, since the path has been previously successful, the same approach will be applied to this new case.

To set a limit for the research, the chosen general timeframe is from 2015 onwards. In this timeframe, Slovakia had to face a lot of issues both domestically and internationally, which all relate to broader events such as the migration crisis. The opportunities on the political stage such as the Council Presidency played an important role for Slovakia because they allowed the country to shape the agenda and set their goals by themselves and not just merely be passive. To limit the research even further, diverse timeframes were chosen for different sub-units, based on the most pressing circumstances. This establishes a good base for the research as it allows for tracing the impact of small states on EU policy-making. Therefore, by looking at the changes over time while tracing the impact in certain policy areas, the gap in the research will be filled.

While analysing the case of Slovakia, this case will be further divided into three sub-units, namely the Council Presidency, V4, and other institutions. They were chosen because the relative impact on policy-making is best observable on them, since one can compare the priorities or goals with the achieved results, together with their strategies to reach them (for more see Bjorkdahl 2008; Kmieliauskaite 2017).

3.2 Data Selection

The data for this research was collected from three different domains: (1) from the official Slovak Council Presidency website and from different Slovak news articles related to the presidency, (2) from the Visegrad group website (documents section), and (3) from online databases of the Council of the EU and the European Commission. Over time, Slovakia also gained more attention in the media, and by including such sources in this research, one can analyse how the content changes according to the target audience (elites or the public, either a source written in English or in Slovak). Lastly, these documents are mostly different types, but they are mainly written, which also sets a boundary for the research.

When consulting the approach to data selection of other scholars in the field, the prevalent way to trace the impact of small states on EU policy-making is by analysing the documents of the EU (such as Council conclusions), national governments' reports (especially from the ministries of foreign affairs), Council presidencies (the proposed policies or goals in comparison with the actual results), and reports from regional units such as the Baltics (for details see Arter 2000; Bjorkdahl 2008; Kmieliauskaite 2017; Kronsell 2002; Lamoreaux and Galbreath 2008). Therefore, this thesis will replicate what other scholars did by adopting the same approach, an approach that worked well in the past and already showed value.

The chosen data consists both of primary and secondary sources. The primary sources specifically include reports from the Commission available at the European Commission

website, European Council publications from the Council website, Slovak government reports from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and from the National Council of SK, Council presidency agenda and programs, statements from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, annual reports of V4 presidencies and their programs available at the official Visegrad group website, and press releases (e.g. Euractiv, Politico). The secondary sources will be of a complementary nature to get a broader picture of the given context and events, to understand how they relate, and to reproduce and apply the same approach as others did before. Furthermore, this type of documents was chosen because as mentioned before, they were previously used in the broader debate, their content is clear without containing hidden meanings and they allow for tracing the relative impact on policy-making quite well. Through looking at what policies and goals are mentioned and how they were justified, the wider context can be analysed too.

The potential limitation of this research is that the number of chosen sources is relatively high considering the given time, and it might not be possible to analyse all of them from the chosen timeframe in depth. Additionally due to the space constraints, it is not possible to cover everything related to the case of Slovakia, thus the most relevant information will be carefully selected. Also, it can be seen as difficult to trace the actual long-term impact (but this can be for example tackled by comparing the goals and the outcomes of the presidencies to determine whether they were successful). However, by covering multiple sources and by creating a larger dataset, the reader will gain an objective picture, and the research will provide a good overview of another small state in the EU trying to reach its aims.

3.3 Methodology

The selected case and data will be analysed by using a method called “Process Tracing”. This qualitative research method is often used by scholars who carry out within-case analysis (Collier 2011, 823). Process tracing can be defined as “the systematic examination of diagnostic evidence selected and analysed in light of research questions and hypotheses posed by the investigator” and it can contribute “both to describing political and social phenomena and to evaluating causal claims” (Collier 2011, 823). Furthermore, process tracing requires finding evidence while consulting a wider literature to understand the theoretical background (Collier 2011, 824). The starting point for using this method is to provide careful description which makes it possible to unfold the events or situations over time (Collier 2011, 824). Afterwards, it is possible to explore the causal ideas, and the evidence gained from the data can confirm or disconfirm these ideas (Collier 2011, 828-829).

This method was chosen for this research due to the large number of sources which are going to be consulted and analysed as a part of the broader picture. It is focused on the mechanisms or causal chains, which is the target of this thesis and therefore is this method the most suitable one to use. The mechanisms are in this case the presidency of the Council, interaction with the V4, and with other EU institutions. Moreover, when using process tracing, one can test the implications which were determined by other scholars and observe if the same narrative applies to the new case. As an example, in the case of Slovakia, it can be observed prior conducting deeper analysis that it uses certain tools (such as the V4) to become more relevant in the EU policy-making arena. Using regional groupings is one of the associations most used by other scholars which relates the case of Slovakia to the broader phenomenon. Such observations help to detect that small states in the EU seek to gain importance, before determining how they actually do it.

In this thesis, the process that will be traced is Slovakia's impact as a small state on policy-making in the EU, and it will be done through analysing the three case studies of V4, Council Presidency and other institutions. Furthermore, this thesis will make use of triangulation, to process different kinds of documents covering the same issues. Triangulation combines data from different sources at different times or from different people (Flick 2004, 178), while using them to cross-check the full story (Checkel 2008, 119). To find out what was going on, it is necessary to link causes and their effects (Kay and Baker 2015, 6). As stated in Bennett and Checkel (2012, 31), a researcher uses triangulation to cross-check the causal inferences derived from process tracing based on various data.

To sum up, process tracing allows for assessing how causal processes work, which means that it will be possible to follow any influential changes over time in case of Slovakia while being able to trace the impact of this small state on EU policies.

4. Background Chapter

This chapter is going to provide some background information about Slovakia's trajectory into the EU, and its functioning since joining the EU until now. The aim of the chapter is to lay out the information relevant for this thesis, since due to the space constraints, it is not possible to provide a full overview. To understand its choices in policy-making, its general standpoints and Slovakia's crucial EU moments, it is essential to explain the steps that were taken in the past, as well as the overall background story.

4.1 Slovakia's road to the EU

The Slovak Republic became an independent state on January 1st, 1993, after the dissolution of the Czech and Slovak Federal Republic (Duleba 2012, 28). Already since its establishment in 1993, there was a broad consensus about its foreign policy priorities, and one of the main goals was to gain membership in Western structures such as the EU and NATO (Duleba 2012, 26). However, Slovakia had been called an "awkward state" because its progress towards EU membership was slower compared to other Central and Eastern European states (Field 2000, 123). This relates to the ability of meeting EU membership criteria, but also to national views (Field 2000, 124). Key conditions for membership were in this case (1) the existence of stable institutions ensuring democracy, (2) developing a viable market economy, and (3) subscribing to the objectives of political, economic and monetary union; Slovakia met the second and third condition, but the first one became problematic (Field 2000, 126).

After the elections in 1994, Vladimir Meciar (who became the Prime Minister) formed a coalition with two other parties, which embarked on an authoritarian path, because it concentrated the powers in the hands of the Prime Minister, who restricted the freedom of the press, and ignored the President together with decisions made by independent courts (Schimmelfennig, Engert, and Knobel 2003, 502-503). Due to his policies, the "awkwardness" of Slovakia arose and when it applied for EU membership in 1995, it was the only candidate country which failed the democratic criteria at that time (Field 2000, 128). Following the election, the European Commission expressed its doubts and fears regarding the domestic political situation (Schimmelfennig, Engert, and Knobel 2003, 503). In 1996, its chances of joining the EU diminished even further and led to the decision of the Commission and the European Council not to invite Slovakia to accession negotiations in 1997 (Schimmelfennig, Engert, and Knobel 2003, 503). The main reasons were nationalist policies of Meciar, together with disregard of democratic politics (Haughton and Malova 2007, 7).

As mentioned before, the decision to exclude Slovakia from accession talks in 1997 was based on failing the democratic requirements (Field 2000, 132). On the other hand, its economic achievements and especially the GDP growth rate were quite significant, which brought even more support to Meciar, who in the meantime ignored EU conditions regarding human rights (Field 2000, 131). Still, Slovak diplomacy failed to meet its main goals and did not manage to supply what the citizens and the government wished for (Duleba 2004, 26). The reason why there was such a huge contrast between Slovakia and other V4 countries was that Slovakia's relations with the EU and NATO were below average, and political dialogue was the main failure (Duleba 2012, 33). This failed political dialogue further resulted in NATO and the EU deciding not to advocate for Slovakia to begin accession talks (Duleba 2012, 33).

In 1998, Meciar's government was replaced by the centrist government of Dzurinda, and it was positively welcomed by the EU with a promise of allowing Slovakia to join the EU soon (Field 2000, 133). By election of a new president in 1999, who adopted a stance relatively independent of party politics, any remaining objections to Slovak membership based on democracy were removed (Field 2000, 133). In the meantime, Slovakia managed to restore regional cooperation within the V4, which later became its main pillar of foreign policy (Duleba 2012, 27). In December 1999, Slovakia was finally approved as a second group country for entering the accession negotiations (Duleba 2012, 48).

When it comes to specific policies, the CEE candidates were pressured to implement EU measures on immigration and asylum, which were based on the preferences of other EU member states (Vermeersch 2005, 76). Slovakia was pressured to strengthen its eastern border, by reinforcing external border controls, improving custom service and by revising bilateral agreements with Ukraine (Vermeersch 2005, 83). By 2001, Slovakia managed to catch up with the Czech Republic, and in 2002, the EC recommended admitting Slovakia as a full member in 2004 (Duleba 2012, 48). Until May 2004, the debates about the EU were mostly concerned with Slovakia's rejection in 1997 and whether the EU wanted the country to join (Haughton and Malova 2007, 7). Nevertheless, the accession in 2004 marked the conclusion of the transformation of Slovakia (Duleba 2012, 49).

4.2 First challenges

As laid down in the Slovak Constitution of September 1st 1992, a decision to enter into a union with other states needs to be confirmed by a referendum, as in the case of joining the EU (Henderson 2004, 657). This referendum was held in May 2003, and produced the most unanimous yes vote in the history of the EU with almost 94% in favour of membership

(Henderson 2004, 652). Most of the voters were young people, rather highly educated people, and people living in urban areas (Henderson 2004, 661).

After joining the EU in the 2004 enlargement, Slovakia emerged and stood out as its "unlikely success story" (Nic, Slobodnik, and Simecka 2014, 3). The country managed to grow economically even further in its first years of membership, and it became politically stable (Nic, Slobodnik, and Simecka 2014, 1). Slovakia's focus was laying on joining the Schengen area in 2007, EMU in 2009, as well as on getting rid of remaining restrictions to the free movement of persons (Nic, Slobodnik, and Simecka 2014, 7). Eventually, Slovakia joined the Eurozone in 2009, and became a frontrunner in the CE region (Nic, Slobodnik, and Simecka 2014, 8).

Nevertheless, it is considered that neither Slovakia nor the other new member states have become EU agenda setters or policy makers in that period, and in more than 90 percent of Council voting they supported the majority (Duleba 2012, 50). Together with other new member states, they were largely passive participants, with the exception of EU nuclear energy policy, where Slovakia and Czech Republic created a platform for discussion on its future developments, the European Nuclear Energy Forum (Duleba 2012, 51; Rybar 2011, 166).

There are two more areas in which Slovakia tried to be more active – relations with the Western Balkans and the Eastern Partnership. Together with other V4 countries, Slovakia has a greater impact within the EU and NATO, as the interests and preferences of the V4 countries in this field are very similar (Duleba 2012, 53). The Western Balkans and the Eastern Partnership have been the most consistent areas in which Slovakia aimed to reach the goals in its EU policy-making (Nic, Slobodnik, and Simecka 2014, 12). Specifically the Western Balkans were considered to be the post-entry priority of foreign policy, as declared by Dzurinda in 2004 (Duleba 2012, 53). Furthermore, it is expected by the old EU member state representatives that Slovakia would be able to contribute to the common EU initiatives, especially in the area of Eastern Partnership, with its experience, skills and expertise (Rybar 2011, 169).

4.3 Migration crisis

In the most recent decade, specifically in the timeframe from 2015 until 2023, Slovakia had to face many challenges, both domestically and internationally. It was a period in which Slovakia became more active in taking part in EU discussions (Gabrizova 2017, 3). During the migration crisis which hit the EU in 2015-2016, Slovakia became one of the member states that rejected the EU policy of relocation of migrants from the very beginning (Brljavac 2017, 98). There was a call from Slovakia for V4 group cooperation to continuously refuse migration policy, and to distinguish between different types of migrants (Mihalik and Jankola 2016, 16). As an example,

Slovakia mentioned that it would only accept Christian refugees from Syria under the proposed relocation scheme (Brljavac 2017, 99). Still, there was no support for the general quota system introduced by the EU, due to the cultural and social situation in Slovakia (Mihalik and Jankola 2016, 20). The rejection of redistribution of refugees even escalated to a lawsuit between the government and the European Commission (Mihalik and Jankola 2016, 23).

The peak of the refugee crisis overlapped with preparations for Slovakia's first Council Presidency, and its domestic elections (Gabrizova 2017, 4). Especially in the second half of 2016, Slovakia was primarily focused on its Presidency performance (Gabrizova 2017, 11). On the contrary, in the first months of 2016, the country aimed its attention at the general elections which changed the political landscape, with the rise of far-right extremists and populist political parties, one of which got to the parliament and for the first time called for Slovakia to leave the EU (Gabrizova 2017, 4). Therefore, Slovakia had to become more careful in terms of rising Euroscepticism both at home and at its neighbours (Gabrizova 2017, 19), which remains to be a challenge until today.

As previously outlined, in this timeframe, Slovakia had to deal with many key issues which represented the decisive moments for the country, and due to their importance, they will be analysed further in this thesis.

4.4 Conclusions

To sum up, this chapter aimed to outline the most important moments in Slovak pre- and post-EU history. The story of Slovakia, a country that almost did not make it to the EU but in the end still managed to join, was described in detail, and it was made clear that it is a relevant case to be discussed in this context. The background information was divided into three main stages, out of which especially the first one was crucial to gain a systematic understanding of the full story. The main takeaway from this chapter is that Slovakia represents a special case since it shows a distinct example of a small state in terms of its past; the country had to face many challenges and it is currently still dealing with some of them as demonstrated in this chapter. The following chapters will build on the most relevant milestones, such as the Council Presidency or the V4 cooperation, and further analysis will be provided for these containing more details.

5. Case Study Analysis – Council Presidency

This chapter will focus on how Slovakia used the tool of Council Presidency to achieve its policy preferences.

5.1 Outset and early objectives

To begin with, Slovakia started the preparations for its first EU Council Presidency already in 2015, when the migration crisis was at its peak, and it also overlapped with domestic preparations for the 2016 general elections (Gabrizova 2017, 4). It is important to mention that Slovakia's 'European image' was damaged at that time, because of the country's fight against mandatory relocation of refugees and the Prime Minister's anti-immigration rhetoric (Bilcik 2017, 64). It even appealed the decision of the Commission to relocate the refugees to the Court of Justice of the EU (Ogrodnik 2016, 1). Migration soon became the most salient issue prior to Slovakia's Presidency and the European Commission continued to work on the Dublin system reform (Gabrizova 2017, 6).

Furthermore, there was a fear of possible Brexit, since the citizens of the United Kingdom voted for withdrawal from the EU in their referendum, and the task of leading the debate was left to the Slovak Council Presidency (Ogrodnik 2016, 1). However, this did neither derail Slovakia's original plans for the Presidency nor affect the Council business, and instead provided a momentum for action (Bilcik 2017, 65). As stated on one of the SK Council Presidency websites, Slovak Presidency came in times when the EU was facing unprecedented challenges such as Brexit, the ongoing migration crisis putting pressure on Schengen area, or such as the recent terrorist attacks in multiple European capitals (Program slovenskeho predsednictva 2016). For Slovakia, there are three main challenges that the country aims to find a solution for at the EU level, and these are migration, energy union, and enlargement in regard to the European Neighbourhood Policy (MediaPortal NRSR 2016).

The Slovak Republic took over the Presidency on 1st of July 2016 from the Netherlands and was for the first time in its history 'at the heart' of the events and developments shaping the future of the EU (Council of the EU 2016). It is well-known that the Council Presidency is supposed to be neutral, however it still enables the member state to direct the attention of the EU to those issues which are important from the national point of view (Ministerstvo zahranicnych veci a europskych zalezitosti Slovenskej republiky, n.d.). Moreover, it was framed in the news in the same way. Slovakia was claimed to become 'the voice and face' of the Council and the Presidency was framed as a unique opportunity for the country to manage one of the most important institutions, to ensure progress in the legislative process and to gain much more

space to pursue own agenda as a presiding country compared to a normal member country (Novy Cas 2016). As promoted in one of the Council Presidency videos, Slovakia is located in 'the heart' of Europe, and its 'heartbeat' became 'the heartbeat of the EU', as the country had a lot of ambition and wanted to contribute to the EU, while bringing new 'energy' (MediaPortal NRSR 2016).

5.2 Priorities of the Slovak Council Presidency

In the times of rising Euroscepticism and Brexit, the Slovak Council Presidency pledged to deliver tangible results for EU citizens and to strengthen their confidence in the EU (Gabrizova 2017, 8). As stated in the speech of the Prime Minister Fico (2016), Slovakia was proud to be able to shape the progress of the EU, but the EU was made for its citizens and should be built by them too, which was confirmed once again by the Brexit referendum. While focusing on the Union citizens, the speech can be viewed as a criticism towards the elitist nature of the EU (Gabrizova 2017, 9). Still, this was the first EU Council Presidency that had to face disintegration of the EU, and while Slovakia used to be one of the most Euro-optimistic countries, due to the recent crises the trust in the EU decreased which was further being abused by extremists, populists, and nationalists (Fico 2016). Thus, such tangible results are essential, to see the concrete impact on daily lives (Fico 2016). In such times, EU Council Presidency provides an opportunity to influence and shape EU policies, while leading discussions and mediating negotiations (Narodna rada Slovenskej republiky 2016).

Each Member State Council Presidency is being a part of a 'trio' that implements a joint political program, while the other members of the 'trio' assist the current presidential country with the program (Ministerstvo zahranicnych veci a europskych zalezitosti Slovenskej republiky, n.d.). Slovakia was in a trio together with the Netherlands and Malta. The established trio program was based on 5 pillars, out of which the last three were in the main focus of Slovakia (Program predsednickeho tria 2016). These represent the completion of the EU's energy market while fostering sustainability, external border management to fight against illegal migration flows and people smuggling, and a stronger partnership with countries neighbouring the EU (Program predsednickeho tria 2016). All in all, the success of the Council Presidency can be measured by its efficient moderation of debates on current issues, such as migration, energy, or Brexit, instead of fully implementing ambitious agendas step by step (Ogrodnik 2016, 2).

When it comes to the actual program of Slovak Council Presidency, the main focus was to reach a 'globally engaged' Europe because as claimed, the EU cannot be safe without stability

and democracy in its neighbourhood and therefore the Slovak Presidency promoted the accession process and an effective European Neighbourhood Policy (Program slovenskeho predsednictva 2016). Among other ambitious priorities were a stronger economy, prioritising energy and digitalisation, finding a solution to the migration crisis, preserving high levels of trade and maintaining credibility of enlargement policy (Council of the EU 2016). Besides that, to encourage an active engagement and more support for new EU projects, the Presidency established three main principles which are needed to restore citizens' trust in the European project: achieving tangible results, overcoming fragmentation, and focusing on the citizen (Predsednictvo SR v Rade EU 2016). As stated in the speech presented by Andrej Danko (who used to be a speaker of the National Council of the Slovak Republic), it was in the common interest to promote a European approach to life together with proven values and rules to strengthen the European identity (Narodna rada Slovenskej republiky 2016).

Based on this information, it is clear that the Slovak government wanted to try to implement the elements of EU policies that correspond with the national interests of Slovakia while blocking those which did not go along with Slovak views (Ogrodnik 2016, 1). Among these was the continuous opposition to the relocation of refugees, as an only exception (Gabrizova 2017, 11). Apart from that, since the Council Presidency became a crucial moment in history for Slovakia, it tried to distance itself from the radical rhetoric of Hungary and Poland on the EU, despite still working in the V4 format (Gabrizova 2017, 12). Ultimately, as will be shown in the next section, the Slovak Council Presidency was relatively successful and managed to deliver results even in some difficult areas (Bilcik 2017, 71).

5.3 Results and findings

As mentioned before, the priorities of the Slovak Presidency were an economically strong Europe, a modern single market, a sustainable migration and asylum policy and a 'globally engaged' Europe (Predsednictvo SR v Rade EU 2016). However, when it comes to delivering results, there were generally low expectations prior to the Slovak Presidency, which allowed the country to achieve the preferred tangible results in many areas (Gabrizova 2017, 12). Slovakia faced distrust especially in dealing with migration and asylum policy, but it still managed to convince others on strategic issues of the EU's future, specifically meaning after Brexit (Bilcik 2017, 64). Overall, Council Presidency provides an opportunity particularly for small states - to set the agenda and policies to an extent which they usually do not enjoy (Batora 2017, 260). Even though the Presidency should not promote key national interests, Slovakia

managed to promote them indirectly, with chairing working parties in the Council, and organising the 'Bratislava summit' without the UK (Batora 2017, 254-255).

In the area of migration and asylum, Slovakia tried to quieten the Dublin system controversy by coming up with a new proposal of 'effective' solidarity (Gabrizova 2017, 13). This new proposal was supposed to provide an alternative to the relocation scheme prepared by the Commission (Barigazzi 2016). It basically meant that accepting the relocation of refugees would not be mandatory, and the countries would choose a different way of contributing, for example by making financial contributions to the pressured Member State, assisting Frontex, or by supplying experts (Gabrizova 2017, 13). The 'effective' solidarity idea further proposed a three-pillar strategy covering normal, deteriorating, or severe circumstances, and from the second one onwards all EU members had to participate (Barigazzi 2016). Assisting Frontex (European Border and Coast Guard Agency) became one of the best options after the Slovak Presidency managed to finalise its establishment (Gabrizova 2017, 14). Nevertheless, Slovakia did not get enough political support for this proposal to go through, and disapproval came mainly from Italy, Malta, and Greece (Furik et al. 2016). The Presidency also did not achieve any new steps in the legislative package on EU asylum as planned (Bilcik 2017, 70).

Even though there was the ongoing discussion over Brexit, it did not stop Slovakia from highlighting the need for further EU enlargement (Ogrodnik 2016, 1). Already during the mid-July negotiations with Serbia, Slovak Foreign Minister Lajcak emphasised the obligations of the EU towards the Western Balkans (Ogrodnik 2016, 1). Later, he also proposed closer cooperation with countries within the European Neighbourhood Policy, especially with Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia in the Eastern Partnership, to strengthen ties with them (Ogrodnik 2016, 1). When it comes to the actual results, two negotiation chapters with Montenegro were opened, four chapters with Serbia were opened and one was closed, the Council requested the Commission to evaluate Bosnia and Herzegovina's application for EU membership, and an agreement on the Visa suspension mechanism with Georgia and Ukraine were reached (Gabrizova 2017, 16). Furthermore, chairing working parties was a useful way of promoting key national interest (making progress in EU enlargement agenda), while providing oversight and leverage in moving forward on the enlargement agenda (Batora 2017, 256). Thus, Slovakia had the opportunity to promote one of its priorities and long-term foreign policy goals, which shows that the capacity of small states to act is strengthened in the period of Council Presidency, as well as it helps to move specific policy proposals forward already by putting them on the agenda (Batora 2017, 257).

Another initiative of the Slovak Presidency was to plan and host an informal meeting of heads of states and governments of the EU in Bratislava, to outline a plan for the future without the UK (Bilcik 2017, 66). The summit was similar to those of pre-Lisbon EU Presidencies, which were based on European Council meetings (Bilcik 2017, 66). The Cabinet of European Council President Tusk at first opposed this idea of Slovak Prime Minister, however, the 27 heads of states and governments continued to negotiate even on the informal boat-trip, which led to a declaration called 'Bratislava process' of future EU reforms (Batora 2017, 258-259). For Slovakia, it represented a major success.

Last but not least, some of the other minor achievements of Slovak Council Presidency were for example that the deal on the 2017 EU budget was reached remarkably quickly compared to all the other years (Gabrizova 2017, 12), the ratification of the Paris Agreement was finalised which was not previously expected to happen due to the limited time of the Presidency (Bilcik 2017, 68), or the Nordstream II pipeline which was successfully avoided in negotiations due to Slovak criticism on it (Batora 2017, 255). Objectively, the Presidency results can be viewed as mixed, since Slovakia had greater ambitions in some areas at the beginning, such as migration where it did not profit at all; however, these policy issues were rather sensitive, and Slovakia still managed to push for progress in the ENP and especially in the enlargement agenda (Bilcik 2017, 70). Nonetheless, the 'Brussels bubble' largely agrees that Slovakia's performance in the Presidency was on a decent level, when not above-average (Gabrizova 2017, 17). During its Presidency, Slovakia favourably took on two roles – agenda shaping role and policy entrepreneur role (Batora 2017, 256). This was done by indirect promotion of key national interests (e.g., avoidance of Nordstream II discussions), and by hosting a summit in Bratislava which achieved essential progress in multiple areas including reforms of the EU (Batora 2017, 260).

To sum up, the rotating Council Presidency remains to be a powerful tool which provides opportunities for small states to influence both agenda setting and policy-making, particularly in the field of foreign policy (Batora 2017, 261). This chapter has determined that Slovakia was able to set and push for their priorities since the very beginning of its presidency, and next to the aforementioned tangible results, the country managed to implement its preferences both in the formal (e.g. migration) and informal sphere (e.g. Bratislava summit).

6. Case Study Analysis – The V4 Cooperation

6.1 Development of the V4

The Visegrad Group (V4) was originally formed to support countries in Central Europe (Poland, Hungary, Czech Republic and Slovakia), especially in their efforts to join the EU and NATO (Garai 2018, 25; Slufinska and Nitszke 2017, 10). However, after this goal was achieved, they had to redefine the role of the regional grouping, and it was clearly formulated that they would aim for a close cooperation between these states (Slufinska and Nitszke 2017, 10). Despite not creating their own institutions or formal structures, the V4 became a diplomatic framework for intergovernmental cooperation in the CE region (Nic 2016, 283). This loose format of cooperation allows V4 to focus on issues of joint interest, while leaving out any possibly conflicting topics (Strazay 2019, 67).

Over time, the V4 established a set of procedures such as the rotating one-year presidency and regular meetings at different levels (for example presidential or ministerial), together with the International Visegrad Fund as the only permanent quasi-institution to promote joint networks and projects among these countries (Nic 2016, 284). When it comes to the rotating presidency, the most important task for the presiding country is to maintain continuity and to coordinate the consultations, while addressing challenges not only at the regional level, but also at the EU level (Garai 2018, 28). In order to become successful when using these strategies, small states need to establish which policy areas are the most important for them, as they are not able to shape the agenda on multiple issues, due to their limited resources (Garai 2018, 37). While engaging in a regional grouping such as the V4 that acts as an amplifier or an ad hoc coalition, the preferred (regional) positions eventually become reinforced (Nic 2016, 281).

Furthermore, the V4 countries believe that they should gain a more active role in shaping EU policies, and through that ensure effective interest representation, specifically in regard to sub-regional or common national interests (Garai 2018, 25). This form of cooperation established a distinct community because the interaction among its members is higher compared to other EU members, due to their similar regional interests (Garai 2018, 33). However, the V4 is not the only actor in the EU that continues to meet as a regional club, there are also the Nordics, the six founding members, Mediterranean club, or even the Franco-German alliance, to mention a few (Nic 2016, 283). Coordinating a smaller group can be more effective when considering the complex EU system (Nic 2016, 283).

Besides that, the V4 countries are not only similar in terms of geography, but also in their economic profile and history, which explains the intra-EU overlap of interests (Nic 2016, 283). This further supports the high degree of socialisation among the officials and experts from these countries, and when it comes to consulting EU policy issues, the first phone calls are made to their V4 counterparts (Nic 2016, 284). Therefore, the V4 became an essential instrument for these countries to achieve their policy goals, and it established a basis for coalition building in the EU arena (Strazay 2019, 68).

6.2 Slovak presidencies and agenda setting

Before the 2004 enlargement, Slovakia made a very positive experience with the other V4 countries, since it lagged behind in the accession process to the EU and NATO, but after the change in the government in 1998, Slovakia gained close support from these countries and eventually managed to join the EU together with the neighbours (Strazay 2019, 72). Since then, Slovakia is trying to balance the V4 partnership with a more proactive approach to deeper EU integration; on the one hand, V4 is the crucial regional initiative and a strategic priority, but on the other hand, the pro-integrationist approach and becoming a member of the Eurozone pushed Slovakia further away from their three neighbours (Strazay 2019, 68). To specify, Hungary, the Czech Republic, and Poland aim for a model of the EU with strengthened role for sovereign states, and Slovakia generally favours deeper integration (Strazay 2019, 67-68). Therefore, Slovakia would not submit any far-reaching demands as for example Poland or Hungary would propose, because this would further result in isolation of those countries, both in the EU and in the V4 (Ogrodnik 2016, 2). Nevertheless, the differences in national preferences do not necessarily affect the cooperation, which is essential to the V4's ability to become more active in shaping key EU policies (Garai 2018, 36). As claimed, the chance of the V4 countries going their own ways can be eliminated, and the collective voice of Central Europe will weigh more in the future EU discussions (Ogrodnik 2016, 2).

Slovakia actively engaged with multiple V4 presidencies. In 2006-2007, one of the main priorities was to coordinate the V4 countries to support Ukraine to join the EU and NATO, while improving the activity in the Western Balkans (Slufinska and Nitszke 2017, 17). Later in 2014-2015, Slovakia mostly continued with the actions initiated by the previous Hungarian presidency, revolving around migration, and it organised various meetings which resulted in a common V4 position regarding the mandatory immigrant quotas (Slufinska and Nitszke 2017, 20). It also stayed committed to providing aid to countries from the Western Balkans and the Eastern Partnership (Slufinska and Nitszke 2017, 20). The V4 became a strong advocate for

democratic transitions in countries of the Eastern Partnership, and it actively supported their reforms necessary for the EU and NATO membership (Slufinska and Nitszke 2017, 22).

After this V4 presidency, Slovakia hosted its first presidency of the Council of the EU. The V4 had the ambitions to use this Council Presidency to strengthen its role in the EU, but a uniform approach was needed to be developed on the key issues (Ogrodnik 2016, 1). Despite the divisions between the EU Member States on the migration crisis, the V4 successfully managed to speak with one voice and strongly opposed the mandatory relocation of refugees (Nic 2016, 282). Moreover, the crisis proved that it was possible for these countries to advocate a common position within the EU, even if it was against the politics of the larger EU countries (Slufinska and Nitszke 2017, 25). Therefore, in this period of Council Presidency, Slovakia managed to act as a mediator between the V4 and the other EU members (Garai 2018, 26).

From July 2018 until June 2019, Slovakia was holding another V4 presidency, which became one of its most important ones due to a period of key events happening in the EU (Dynamic Visegrad for Europe 2018, 2). As stated in the programme, the V4 moved from coordination of integration process to showing common EU positions, bringing its own views and solutions, but it still only represents a platform for cooperation and not an EU alternative (Dynamic Visegrad for Europe 2018, 2). One of the main aims of this Slovak V4 presidency was to strengthen the Visegrad's position within the EU, while promoting unity at European level, offering solutions and respecting differences related to national interests (Dynamic Visegrad for Europe 2018, 2). Similar to its Council Presidency in 2016, Slovakia's main objective here was to bring concrete, 'tangible' results to the citizens of V4 again (Dynamic Visegrad for Europe 2018, 3). Speaking about unity, the key events happening during this presidency was the UK's withdrawal from the EU and the finalisation of negotiations on the future relations between the UK and the EU (Dynamic Visegrad for Europe 2018, 3). The Slovak Presidency tried to achieve a balanced agreement on the withdrawal through the V4, to support the interests of the V4 (Dynamic Visegrad for Europe 2018, 7). Furthermore, one of the long-term Slovak foreign policy goals is to continue the political dialogue on the enlargement of the EU with the Western Balkans and the Eastern Partnership. Therefore, the presidency aimed to keep this topic high on the EU agenda, while arranging special sessions with the countries to progress (Dynamic Visegrad for Europe 2018, 14).

Even though the V4 countries did not always speak with one voice in the past, they share a common position on many EU-related issues (Strazay 2019, 73). Slovakia put some of them on the presidency agenda, for example developing existing partnerships, or promoting a

'positive' agenda (Strazay 2019, 70). When it comes to concrete policy goals, the continuation of cohesion policy was highly emphasised, together with bringing long-term solutions (Strazay 2019, 71). The restoration of the Schengen area with securing the external borders was high on the agenda too, with explicitly stating the opposition to mandatory refugee relocations (Strazay 2019, 72). All in all, the way in which Slovakia coordinated the countries to achieve the presidency goals was important also because of the need to improve V4 interconnectedness and embeddedness, to reach an effective interest representation within the EU in line with national interests and to become even more active in shaping the EU policies instead of passively observing what was going on (Garai 2018, 39).

The most recent Slovak V4 presidency commenced in July 2022, taking over in times of Russian aggression against Ukraine which represented another defining moment for the region (Programme of the Slovak Presidency of the Visegrad Group 2022, 2). The enlargement policy of the EU remained a priority and after granting the candidate status to both Ukraine and Moldova, the V4 aimed to support them on their way to the accession, while keeping the Western Balkans high on the agenda as well (Programme of the Slovak Presidency of the Visegrad Group 2022, 2). During this presidency, Slovakia emphasised 'tangible' contributions to European solutions again, which should have a positive impact on citizens in the future (Programme of the Slovak Presidency of the Visegrad Group 2022, 3). Due to the war in Ukraine, Slovakia's main goal was to start phasing out the dependency on Russian energy imports while supporting diversification of sources at the EU level (Programme of the Slovak Presidency of the Visegrad Group 2022, 3). The Slovak V4 presidency needed to coordinate the common approach of the V4 and look for common positions on the reform of the Schengen area, also due to the refugee influx caused by the war which put the V4 countries under pressure since they were a frontline region (Programme of the Slovak Presidency of the Visegrad Group 2022, 7).

Nonetheless, there were some disagreements over stances on Russia, Ukraine, and on the rule of law, which resulted in Slovakia wanting to 'lower the voice of' or even 'mute' the V4 (Dlhopolec 2022; Yar 2022). Almost a decade ago, Ivan Korcok, who used to be a permanent representative to the EU, mentioned how the V4's cooperation proved in a 'realisation moment' that it was a tangible and effective way of achieving results in the EU (Nic 2016, 285). However, after becoming the Slovak Minister of Foreign Affairs, Korcok advocated for significantly muting the foreign policy dimension of the V4, and instead focusing on economic and infrastructural links that should be expanded and strengthened even more in the context of the

crisis (Yar 2022). Still, during the presidency, Slovakia and its government emphasised the need to return to the roots of cooperation in the V4, based on respecting democracy, and being fully committed to EU integration (Dlhopolec 2022).

Building on these arguments, Slovakia has always wished to belong to the 'core' of the EU by being fully integrated, and by supporting deeper EU cooperation (Strazay 2019, 70). Considering this, Slovakia is doing best among other small states when it comes to coalition building, because when it holds a rotating presidency of the V4, the chances of transmitting interests are higher compared to Hungary or Poland, since Slovakia is better embedded in the EU (Garai 2018, 37).

6.3 Results and findings

The V4 has managed to exert influence in some policy areas, it successfully endorsed the position of Central Europe on multiple issues (such as migration), and it gained more acceptance among the remaining member states (Garai 2018, 29). The V4 regional cooperation proves that being like-minded is an important factor, since it explains why the V4 cannot always set the EU agenda, but it can indeed veto EU policies (Garai 2018, 34). Even though it cannot be viewed as positive for the EU, the V4 can often unite in their opposition, as they did against the mandatory redistribution of migrants (Dlhopolec 2022).

Coming back to the 'tangible' results, and to demonstrate what can result from V4 presidency, in the Slovak case of 2018/2019 more than 200 expert and political events within the V4 were organised, to support the intensive cooperation (Slovak Presidency 2018/2019 of the Visegrad Group, n.d.). The Slovak V4 presidency further managed to sign and adopt 26 documents, and it actively promoted new ideas and sharing of best practices, while finding new opportunities for joint action of the V4 (Slovak Presidency 2018/2019 of the Visegrad Group, n.d.). To highlight some of the EU areas where the most progress occurred, among these were the future of the post-Brexit EU, protection of the EU external border, or external relations with enlargement and neighbourhood policy (Slovak Presidency 2018/2019 of the Visegrad Group, n.d.).

In terms of V4 presidency, it is an effective instrument to put forward issues on the agenda that would otherwise not be discussed, and to progress in specific policies at the EU level, while persuading the other three members to compromise in finding a common stance. The presiding country can set the priorities according to what they consider as the most crucial at that moment, and in that way, they can also neglect issues which they do not wish to touch upon. The Slovak V4 presidency is always special in a way that it is the only V4 country that

shares a border with each of the V4 countries, but there were multiple reasons that continuously involved the country in active cooperation with other V4 members (Strazay 2019, 72). One of them is also the seat of the only V4 institution, the International Visegrad Fund, which is located in Bratislava and plays an important role in raising awareness of V4 collaboration and activities (Strazay 2019, 73).

To sum up, Slovakia can effectively pursue its interests through the V4 forum at the EU level, despite being a small state, and also the smallest V4 state (Strazay 2019, 73). It was relatively helpful for Slovakia to succeed when the countries shared the same views; together, they have been very supportive of EU enlargement policy, especially towards the Western Balkans, but also in the ENP and the Eastern Partnership (Strazay 2019, 73). Therefore, a regional coalition building was proved to be another way of small states influencing EU agenda setting and policy-making.

7. Case Study Analysis – Other Institutions

The two most common strategies for small states are the Council Presidency and working in regional/subregional units. The third category deals with the remaining institutions and is necessary to mention, to fully understand what alternatives small states have at hand. It will be examined how lobbying is frequently used to impact certain policies, which is also relevant for the next three parts, especially for the EP. Moreover, the EP and the Commission provided a useful channel for Slovakia to express its ideas. Lastly, the Permanent Representation will be discussed as another platform for states to interact with the EU.

7.1 Small States and lobbying

To start off, lobbying represents a possibility to influence policy outcomes in an informal way (Panke 2012, 129). It can take place at many different levels such as local, regional, or even international, and it allows the actors to contact the key people while making them support the country's interests, and eventually gain influence on policy outcomes (Panke 2012, 145). States tend to lobby EU institutions more often when they have the financial and administrative capacities, however, some are usually the most active when it comes to policy areas that strongly matter to them, e.g., in case of Slovakia, the country relies on lobbying especially when it comes to the fields of environmental, agricultural, or economic policy (Panke 2012, 130).

When using lobbying as one of the strategies to influence some policies, the member states can lobby the Commission while it develops policy proposals, the Council Presidencies who set the agendas, or the EP that can possibly delay the procedure, however Slovakia is rather at the lower end of the lobbying activity spectrum (Panke 2012, 131). Besides that, Slovakia is still a relatively new member state with a low number of seats in the EP, which are some of the essential factors when it comes to the frequency of lobbying (Panke 2012, 141). Nevertheless, as mentioned before, it is crucial for the states to have the financial means in order to employ experts or negotiators who will maintain the contacts with important people and do the lobbying (Panke 2012, 134), and Slovakia can be considered as one of the countries that rather have shortcoming in this area. Therefore, countries such as Sweden, Finland, or even Ireland contact the EU institutions twice as frequently as Slovakia, Cyprus, Estonia, or Lithuania do (Panke 2012, 145). To sum up, there are many variations between countries and policies when it comes to lobbying, but specifically Slovakia relies on lobbying on the same level, especially in the three aforementioned policy fields (Panke 2012, 145).

7.2 The European Parliament

The European Parliament plays an important role in the institutional setting because the activities of its members (MEPs) are not restricted to intra-EP work (Biro-Nagy 2016, 5). The MEPs often keep in touch with other institutions, both national and international, but also with the domestic press, citizens of their country, or even with many advocacy groups (Biro-Nagy 2016, 5). What makes it more difficult compared to other national politicians is the fact that they need to simultaneously demonstrate their priorities, both national and European, and they further have to decide which activities they will focus on in the EP, considering relationships with other EU institutions (Biro-Nagy 2016, 3). In the case of Slovakia, most MEPs decided to focus on their European priorities, together with their preferred ways of policy-making (Biro-Nagy 2016, 14).

The MEPs can have an impact on EU policy-making through creating a close relationship with Commission officials (from a certain policy field) who are no longer politically active in the Commission (Biro-Nagy 2016, 9). If the MEPs have a strong interest in a specific policy and want to affect it, they will try to find out more about the ways in which it would be possible through the contact with commissioners, which creates more cooperation over time (Biro-Nagy 2016, 9). Furthermore, being a rapporteur offers another chance of becoming more active (even more than the MEPs), because they prepare opinions and submit amendments in a given policy area (Biro-Nagy 2016, 26). They are also quite active when submitting parliamentary questions to other EU institutions (Biro-Nagy 2016, 26). Both posing questions and supporting motions for resolutions are important, because they are part of the oversight function over the Council and the Commission and show to the public that when it comes to national interests of their own countries, they will certainly check up on the other EU institutions (Biro-Nagy 2016, 19).

During the Slovak Council Presidency in 2016, the priorities of the presidency were outlined to the EP committees by Slovak government members in 20 hearings (Europa Nu 2016). That represented an essential step for Slovakia since it enabled the country to restate its aims for the period and when showing the priorities to the key committees, the country revealed its determination in achieving some policy goals. Therefore, it can be seen as an influential act for some small states that in this way get another opportunity to be heard.

For Slovakia, the two most important hearings were in the LIBE committee and the AFET committee. Interacting with the key committees and MEPs could have an impact on issuing resolutions, persuading others to take a different stance, and eventually in the final

voting. In the LIBE committee, the focus was put on implementing the European Border and Coast Guard, while in the AFET committee, the main aim for Slovakia was to address further enlargement, since it is the most effective instrument to reform and transform countries (Europa Nu 2016). This represents another way of impacting EU policies, since it allows the presiding country to show its goals and make sure that they will not be ignored when it comes to the legislative process.

7.3 The European Commission

The European Commission is an important body for small states, especially when it comes to financing of certain preferred policies. As an example, in 2022, the Commission approved a €600 million direct grant for Slovakia to support companies that had to deal with increased energy costs due to Russia's war in Ukraine, after Slovakia notified the Commission under the Temporary Crisis Framework (European Commission 2022). Energy policy has been one of the crucial policies for Slovakia for decades, and grants like this will help reduce the burden of the costs in Slovakia (European Commission 2022), while eliminating the dependency on Russia.

Moreover, the Slovak government often sends different national plans to the Commission for approval; recently, a national recovery and resilience plan was submitted due to the increased costs related to REPowerEU (Hudec 2023). Slovakia asked for an additional €403 million to speed up the development of alternatives to the Russian fossil fuels, since the Commission plans to reduce the dependence on Russia and diversify supplies (Hudec 2023). This shows that when a state takes initiative, it can succeed in its goals, and its policy preferences can become EU preferences in those specific circumstances.

Apart from that, the current Vice-President of the Commission is Maros Sefcovic from Slovakia, who is often praised by many diplomats for his work for the EU in the Commission. Nevertheless, what can be noticed from his presentation of the 2022 Commission work programme at the EP is the rhetoric somewhat similar to the 2016 Slovak Council Presidency, emphasising that all citizens should benefit from the digital transition (which was also one of the goals of SK Council Presidency in 2016) among many other points (Europa Nu 2021). When concluding the speech, it was mentioned once again how the Commission wants to deliver results to the citizens, while policy-making represents a 'team effort' between the Member States and EU institutions (Europa Nu 2021), which is similar to the 'tangible results' that Slovakia points out almost at every occasion. This shows that while the Commissioners are supposed to be neutral in terms of non-affiliation with a particular member state and should work for the good of the EU, it is obvious that it is not possible to eliminate the nationality from

the person. Therefore, having a commissioner with a portfolio of a domestic preference who is also actively engaging in the work of the Commission is important for small states to affect some policy choices.

7.4 The Permanent Representation

The Permanent Representation is responsible for reporting and informing the national capital about different countries' positions towards a policy proposal, the developments in the Council, and about the chances that a proposal will be adopted; therefore, they need to have a comprehensive understanding of the EU to be able to interact and create recommendations for the national governments (Denca 2009, 397). They gather such complementary information in the meetings in Council, or via informal meetings, but both represent a close interaction (Denca 2009, 397). Ultimately, they should find a balance between national and European position (Denca 2009, 402).

When it comes to the large old members, they are still more influential in the design of policies compared to the small member states, no matter if they are old or from the CEE region, which confirms the idea that there are still inequalities between the MS (Denca 2009, 389-399). As far as the perception goes, the larger member states have generally more influence in the policy-making process, however the EU membership enhances the position of a small member, and it allows the country to become more ambitious in their policy objectives (Denca 2009, 402). All in all, EU membership provides a new platform for the small states to primarily defend their national interests, and to try to pursue more ambitious policy goals when possible (Denca 2009, 402).

8. Conclusion

This thesis has engaged with the debate on small states in the European Union and has analysed the strategies of small states to pursue their policy preferences on a new case study of Slovakia. The case study was analysed through the method of process tracing and triangulation while drawing sources from multiple data streams, and as the research findings demonstrated, there were three main categories identified that allowed Slovakia to act within the EU. Additionally, this research represents a valuable contribution to the field of small states, as well as to the field of EU policy-making process. Especially the broader debate on small states has become more relevant in the last couple of years, due to the rising number of small states within the EU. Thus, it is essential to analyse their relative power and the ways in which they operate. Therefore, by choosing a new case study of Slovakia, this thesis has filled in the gap in the literature and generated new knowledge within the broader discussion.

To answer the research question, *What strategies do small states use to impact the policy-making process in the European Union?*, this thesis has demonstrated that the case study (Slovakia) used three different strategies to impact the policy-making process in the EU. The two main ways are the instrument of Council Presidency and working in the regional alliance, the V4. During Council Presidency, Slovakia managed to achieve most of their policy ambitions, which coincided with their national goals (displaying a need for further enlargement and opening and closing multiple negotiation chapters, strengthening the ties within the ENP, organising an informal summit to bring more attention to Slovakia, but also rejecting the mandatory relocation of refugees during the migration crisis). These findings further proved that the capacities of a small state to act are enhanced during the Council Presidency, and putting specific policy aims on the agenda helps the small state to exert its influence (Batora 2017, 257).

Furthermore, when considering the cooperation in regional groupings, it was identified that Slovakia actively makes use of the Visegrad Four to meet its goals in the EU, and the country's chances are additionally improved during the V4 presidencies, when it enables the country to strengthen its position and persuade the other three countries to promote a common position (such as regarding the mandatory relocation of refugees, energy, Western Balkans, ENP, Brexit, or even the Schengen area). As stated before, these are the two most common strategies for small states in the EU to impact the policy process, because they allow the state to actively participate in the proceedings. However, as analysed in this thesis, there is also a third way which can be seen as complementary to the first two, but still equally relevant for

small states to use. This category includes working with other institutions (either in terms of lobbying or working with the actual EU institutions such as the EP, Commission, or the Permanent Representation in Brussels), and confirms that there are indeed several alternatives for small states in the EU to employ. Still, one limitation of the research would be the space constraint which makes this thesis to present only the most important strategies in the case of Slovakia within the specific timeframe, even though there are still some other ways that small states in the EU use to make an impact. These are included in the literature about the Baltic States or the Nordics.

To sum up, this thesis has contributed to the broader debate on how small states operate, but also particularly to the debate on small states and their functioning in the EU. Moreover, the selected case study of Slovakia adds another interesting perspective to the field and proves that it is possible for small states to still act when the specific policy matters. Based on these results, it would be useful to reproduce the same approach in the future since it already showed quality and value, and future studies could either focus on new case studies from the Central-Eastern European region or research specifically one of the tools to compare the impact of multiple different small states in the EU within that category.

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