Various neutral, mono- and dicatonic halogen bond donors were screened for their ability to act as catalysts in a Nazarov cyclisation reaction. Using a highly preorganized dicatonic catalyst with a noncoordinating counterion proved essential for high activity.

The Nazarov cyclisation is a versatile method to obtain highly substituted cyclopentenones. This carbon–carbon bond formation reaction, which involves 4π electrocyclization, is usually catalysed either by Brønsted or Lewis acids. In recent years, several examples of organocatalysed Nazarov reactions have also been reported. These cases include electrophilic phosphonium ions as nonmetallic Lewis acids as well as enantioselective transformations with organoboron compounds, phosphoramidate Brønsted acids or bifunctional thiourea derivatives. The latter represents, to the best of our knowledge, the only case of a hydrogen-bond-catalysed Nazarov reaction.

In recent years, halogen bonding (XB) – the attraction between electrophilic halogen substituents and Lewis bases – has emerged as a promising noncovalent interaction for various applications in solution. Its usage in organocatalysis is still relatively sparsely investigated. Next to several examples of XB-catalysed halide abstraction reactions, there are also a few cases involving the activation of neutral electrophiles by XB. Most notably, imines/quinolines and carbonyl compounds have so far been addressed by XB donors in reduction, Mukaiyama–aldol addition, Michael addition and (aza) Diels–Alder reactions. Still, however, these cases only include three examples of carbonyl activation, and thus the Nazarov cyclization represents a perfect further test reaction to study the intricacies of XB organocatalysis.

Herein, we investigate the catalytic activity of previously reported mono- and bidentate halogen bond donors, as well as neutral polyfluorinated variants in the reaction depicted in Scheme 1. As the chemical shifts of the starting material (divinyl ketone 1) and the product (cyclopentenone 2) are clearly separated, the reaction can easily be monitored via 1H-NMR spectroscopy.

In the absence of any catalyst, no reaction occurs at room temperature. Similarly, no catalytic activity was observed even...
markedly increased performance (full consumption of the starting material) was observed: satisfactory performance could only be achieved with noncoordinating anions like tetraakis[3,5-bis(trifluoromethyl)phenyl]borate (BARF$^4_4$) but not with counterions like triflate. Somewhat surprisingly, however, the triflate as well as the BARF$^4_4$ salt of bis(imidazolium) derivative 7 showed no catalytic activity in this reaction – despite their earlier mentioned success in carbonyl activation reactions. Apparently, the Lewis acidity of these compounds is too low to allow sufficient reduction of the activation barrier, and thus the more electrophilic bis(benzimidazolium) derivatives 8 and 9 were investigated. The triflate salt of the direct benzimidazolium analogue, 8/OTf, leads to hardly noticeable formation of product 2 (≤5%) after 5 hours (Table 1).$^{17}$

The corresponding BARF$^4_4$ salt, on the other hand, showed a markedly increased performance (full consumption of 1 after 2 h with 5 mol% catalyst), which is in line with the noncoordinating nature of this counterion. In the $^1$H-NMR spectra of the reaction, next to the chemical shifts of starting material 1 and product 2, an additional set of signals was observed over time, which likely correspond to enol 10 (see Scheme 2 and the ESI†). An example of such spectra with compound syn-9/OTf as a catalyst is depicted in Fig. 1.

Since we postulate that halogen bonding will only influence the initial step (electrocyclization) of the overall reaction, but not the following keto–enol tautomerization (see Scheme 2), the analysis will first focus on the rate acceleration of the electrocyclization (which can be conveniently monitored via the consumption of starting material 1). The kinetic profile of this step in the presence of catalysts 8 or 9 is shown in Fig. 2. It becomes immediately apparent that the better performance of 8/BARF$^4_4$ vs. 8/OTf in overall product formation is also observed in the electrocyclization step. The Lewis acidity of these bidentate XB donors can be further increased by the introduction of a trifluoromethyl group in the central benzene core,$^{11}$ which prevents rotation of the XB-donating moiety and allows the isolation of preorganized syn-atropisomer 9. The superior performance of 9 vs. 7 in a halide abstraction case$^{11}$ and a Michael addition reaction has been demonstrated before.$^{14}$

![Scheme 2](image.png)

**Scheme 2** Postulated mechanism of the halogen bond catalysed Nazarov reaction.
A strong effect of this preorganization was also found in the Nazarov reaction: triflate salt syn-9/OTf showed a markedly better performance compared to its almost inactive analogue 8/OTf (70% vs. 2% consumption of 1 after 2 h, see Fig. 2). As expected, the highest catalytic activity was achieved with the BArF$_4$ salt syn-9/BArF$_4$ – in less than 5 min, and the complete conversion of starting material 1 to enol 10 was observed with only 5 mol% of the catalyst. A reasonable kinetic profile of the electrocyclization step could only be obtained after reducing the amount of catalyst to 1 mol% (Fig. 2). In all cases mentioned so far, the cis/trans ratio of product 2 was in the range between 2 : 1 and 3 : 1 (Table 1).

Thus, the two key parameters to increase the performance of 8/OTf are the change of the counterion to BArF$_4$ and the introduction of preorganization. Closer inspection of Fig. 2 indicates that the former has a larger impact: exchanging the counterion provides a more active catalyst (8/BArF$_4$, green line) compared to the more preorganized one with the same counterion (syn-9/OTf, orange line).

In order to establish whether the observed activity was in indeed due to halogen bonding, non-iodinated compounds 11, 12 and 13 were also tested as catalysts (Fig. 3). Even though they share all structural features except the iodine substituents with catalysts 7–9, none of them showed any activity. Consequently, activation by hydrogen bonding or electrostatic interactions can be ruled out.

Two possible catalytically active decomposition products of the XB donors are elemental iodine and acid traces. A comparison experiment with 5 mol% of elemental iodine showed that it indeed induces quantitative product formation after 30 minutes. The exact origin of this activity is not entirely clear, as elemental iodine has several pathways (XB, hidden acid catalysis or iodonium formation) to activate organic molecules. It is, however, very unlikely that the observed activity of XB donors 8 and syn-9 is due to the decomposition to elemental iodine, for various reasons: (a) no spectroscopic evidence of decomposition was obtained (only one $^{19}$F signal was observed in the case of syn-9 after the reaction); (b) the consumption of the starting material follows sigmoidal kinetics with 0.1 mol% of iodine (see Fig. S8 in the ESI† and compare Fig. 2 for 8 and 9); and (c) a drastically different cis/trans ratio of product 2 (23 : 1) was found with elemental iodine.

Likewise, addition of 1 mol-% of HOTf triggered full conversion of compound 1 to product 2 within 1 hour. The kinetic profile of the acid-catalysed reaction, however, is entirely different from the ones observed for catalysts 8 and syn-9, in which the enol is accumulated (see the ESI†). In addition, the cis/trans ratio of product 2 is once again markedly different (6.5 : 1). As a consequence, catalysis by elemental iodine or acid traces – either as impurities or decomposition products – appears very unlikely and the mode of activation is most probably halogen bonding.

Even though the focus of this study was on the electrocyclization step, it is noteworthy that the rate of the keto–enol tautomerization was apparently not significantly influenced by the catalysts. Also, in some cases the rate of formation of cyclopentenone 2 decreases significantly after full consumption of starting material 1 (see Fig. 4).

Finally, the nature ofXB catalysis in this reaction was also investigated by DFT calculations using the M06-2X functional, Grimme D3 dispersion corrections and the def2-TZVP(D) basis set. The corresponding transition state of the Nazarov cyclisation of substrate 1 with a truncated version of XB donor syn-9 is shown in Fig. 5.

![Fig. 3 Structures of reference compounds.](image1)

![Fig. 4 $^1$H-NMR yield vs. time profile for the formation of cyclopentenone 2. The error is approximately 5%. $c_0$(1) = 15.4 mM.](image2)

![Fig. 5 DFT-calculated transition state structure of the Nazarov cyclisation catalysed by halogen bond-donor syn-9 (M06-2X D3 def2-TZVP(D)). Selected distances [Å] and angles [°]: I–O 2.68 and 2.69; C–I–O 162 and 164. Graphic generated using CYLview.](image3)
The optimized geometry features a clear bidentate binding
to the carbonyl oxygen with iodine–oxygen bond distances of
2.68 Å and 2.69 Å. The corresponding barrier of activation
(corrected with the SMD1825 intrinsic solvent model for dichloro-
methane) is 26.4 kcal mol⁻¹. This result is in good agreement
with the experimental findings. The barrier for the uncatalysed
Nazarov cyclisation (33.1 kcal mol⁻¹) is significantly higher.

In conclusion, the first halogen-bonding-catalysed Nazarov
cyclisation reaction was reported, which is also just the 4th example of carbonyl activation by this interaction. The catalytic
activity could be clearly traced back to halogen bonding via
comparison experiments. The effect of counterion exchange and
preorganisation was investigated and compared, and strong
performance could only be achieved by a combination of both.
In fact, it seems that this reaction is the most challenging one
activated by halogen bonding so far (as $7{\text{BAR}}^4$ did not show any
effect in contrast to all examples reported earlier).

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Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts to declare.

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