

4 Bringing the European Union closer to the member states? The impact of the rotating EU Council presidency on small member states

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4.1 Introduction

This chapter examines the administrative challenge of preparing and holding the European Union (EU) Council presidency in six small¹ and one larger member state (MS)² between 2013 and 2017. With the expanding size and competence of the EU, the challenge of holding the rotating presidency of the EU has grown to brokering solutions and compromises between currently 27 Member States across a number of policy areas. On the other hand, with the Eastern enlargement, states as small as Malta with half a million of inhabitants and compact administration must manage the task that content- and effort-wise is about the same as for Germany or France with previous experience in the post and a much larger administrative capacity. The chapter explores how small states manage the challenge of steering EU decision-making process for six months and what strategies do they adopt to overcome the size-related disadvantages. In addition, the chapter explores whether there is a difference between small states that held the position before ('old' MS) and those that are faced with the challenge for the first time ('new' MS).³

I analyze six small MS (Ireland, Lithuania, Latvia, Luxembourg, Slovakia, Malta) presidencies comparing them to one larger MS (the Netherlands). Among them, four MS held the position for the first time (Lithuania, Latvia, Slovakia, Malta) and three had previous experience (Ireland, Luxembourg, the Netherlands). I seek to establish whether the presidency matters on a longer term and whether any of the experience and expertise gained is retained by the MS. In addition, the chapter looks at whether size- or experience-related structural disadvantages impact the quality or results of the presidency. Theoretically, the chapter introduces the concept of administrative capacity, composed of skills and resources necessary for successful participation in and coordination of EU affairs in a MS, building on new institutionalist approaches. Administrative capacity is employed as the dependent variable, while the EU Council presidency serves as the independent one. Administrative capacity is broken down to institutional memory; institutional set-up including administrative structures, resources, coordination practices as well as soft skills such as knowledge; and attitudes of civil servants involved. Each of the components is rooted in a different new institutionalist approach. Empirically, the chapter builds on 97 expert interviews with civil servants and diplomats involved in planning and conducting one of the seven rotating presidencies.

The chapter starts with a short literature review highlighting the contribution of this research, then introduces the institution of the rotating presidency, the theoretical framework and the methodological approach along with the case selection. I present the results in two sections – one focuses on the preparation and the conduct of the presidency, while the other analyzes the aftermath and the long-term impact. The final section summarizes the findings, which show that the presidency presents an important opportunity to the MS to (re-)engage with the EU policy-making processes and actors. Even though the rotating presidency is a neutral broker rather than a political power in the vast majority of cases, it still helps MS to ‘build up muscles in Brussels’⁴ allowing to better represent their interests on the EU level afterwards. The findings also highlight the additional administrative burden the position puts on small as opposed to larger MS as well as a difference between how first-time and routine presidencies are approached. However, these do not impact the quality or the results of the presidency.

4.2 Literature review

The literature on the impact of the Council presidency on the MS, and specifically the national administrations, is limited. Existing studies suggest that holding an EU Council Presidency contributes to more active and effective MS participation in EU affairs, the emergence of new methods of policy coordination, enhanced skill development and Europeanization of national public administrations (Batory and Puetter, 2013; Bunse, 2009; Hayes-Renshaw and Wallace, 2006; Jesień, 2013; Marek and Baun, 2011; Panke, 2010a). Holding the Council presidency leads to extensive political and administrative capacity building on behalf of the MS, especially if the countries are small and new to the EU and as a result have had limited resources and time to internalize EU policy-making processes (Gärtner et al., 2011; Panke, 2010c). However, apart from identifying the presidency as an opportunity for the MS, these studies do not specify what happens in national administrations and, especially, whether the governments maintain the adjustments. The literature that goes deeper into the administrative impact of the Council presidency only focuses on a small number of cases and a comprehensive comparison is missing.

The influence of the Council presidency on national governments was studied by Nuallain and Hoscheit (1985) back in the EU of 10 MS when the presidency still rotated alphabetically and had a mostly administrative function, encompassing fewer policy areas and following different legislative procedures, and so it is hardly comparable to the current presidencies. Kaniok and Gergelova Štegirova (2014) examined the impact of the Council presidency on the Czech administration, finding that it expanded the capacity and skills of national administration but was a ‘wasted opportunity’ in the end, since the government did not invest in maintaining the practices or staff involved. In her recent study, Galušková (2017) looks at implications of five first-time presidencies for EU policy coordination mechanisms, finding that it constituted a critical juncture for the Czech Republic and partly for Poland and Lithuania. Jensen and Nedergaard (2017) note that the

presidency preparation period has barely received any attention. They also raised the same question as this chapter and tested the implications of the Council presidency on the administrations of one presidency trio – Poland, Denmark and Cyprus in 2011–2012 – finding that the presidency had the most transforming effect on the small Cypriot administration holding the post for the first time (Jensen and Nedergaard, 2017). To contribute to the rather limited body of literature, I explore seven small MS presidencies as likely targets for administrative change as a result of holding the position, including both the preparation and the presidency period. This chapter adds a new dimension to the existing research by comprehensively comparing several, namely three ‘old’ and four ‘new’ MS presidencies including six small and one larger MS to explore whether and how the Council presidency contributes to Europeanization of national administrations.

4.3 The rotating presidency of the Council of the EU

The rotating presidency of the EU Council was established as a preponderantly administrative institution to share the burden of planning of the Council meetings between the six MS of the European Coal and Steel Community (Pernice, 2003). However, with a growing number of MS and the widening scope of competences of the now European Union, the presidency acquired additional obligations. It is now an important mechanism of leadership, equality and fairness in the EU, affording every MS in turn, regardless of its size or EU membership duration, a six-month period to lead proceedings of the EU Council (Bunse, 2009). The main functions of the rotating presidency include, firstly, the management of Council activity, organization and chairing of Council meetings on all levels, both in Brussels and the respective MS assisted by the Council General Secretariat (CGS). Secondly, the presidency has a limited capacity to set EU agenda by prioritizing certain issues in its programme in line with the predefined presidency trio programme drafted by three MS and the European Commission (Elgström, 2003; Warntjen, 2007; Jensen and Nedergaard, 2014). Furthermore, chairing most of the formations of Council meetings, from minister to working party level, the presidency acts as a neutral broker and as a mediator between MS. It is also a representative of the EU Council with the European Commission, the European Parliament and other EU institutions (Elgström, 2003; Hayes-Renshaw and Wallace, 2006). The Lisbon Treaty in 2009 constrained the scope of action of the presidency by introducing the permanent president of the European Council and the High Representative for Foreign Affairs to chair the respective council formation in favour of more continuity at the highest level of political leadership of the EU (Jensen and Nedergaard, 2014).

The Lisbon Treaty notably decreased the visibility but not necessarily the workload of the rotating presidency, since it only lost two Council formations. In a nutshell, instead of merely participating in the meetings of the Council of the EU, the representatives of the presiding MS must chair them,⁵ act as brokers between the ministers, the diplomats and the bureaucrats of the EU-28⁶ on all Council levels and represent the Council of the EU in dialogues with the European Parliament and the European Commission, steering the legislative process of the EU. Furthermore,

the presidency must organize informal ministerial Council meetings in the capital (Council of the EU, 2023).

EU Council presidency is an extraordinary event in the area of international cooperation, providing unprecedented exposure to EU affairs not only to political elites but also to a large group of civil servants (Schout, 2009). None of the similar obligations in other international or regional organizations, such as a seat on the Security Council of the United Nations, the presidency of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, Višegrad, Benelux, the Baltic Sea Council or others, compare in their scope and intensity to the EU Council presidency. A handful of diplomats at the Ministries of Foreign Affairs usually handle UN or OECD matters, NATO summits only last several days, while the EU Council presidency requires the involvement of all national ministries and over a thousand of civil servants for six months, preceded by over a year of intensive preparation, which is occasionally identified as busier than the presidency itself.⁷ According to civil servants from 'new' MS, the only event that compared to the Council presidency was the EU accession in 2004.⁸

Normally, regardless of the size of the administration of the MS holding a Council presidency, the scope of tasks it must perform, such as the number of working party or ministerial meetings as well as informal Council meetings in the MS, is similar, making the presidency a bigger challenge for compact administrations of small MS. However, Kirchner (1992) identified three groups of contextual factors that may impact the conduct and the scope of individual presidencies differentiating them: domestic, EU-institutional and external. Domestic factors include availability of financial and human resources, national EU policy coordination practices, public opinion towards the EU and national political context including elections or changes in the cabinet during or close to the presidency. EU-level factors relate to the institutional evolution of the EU and treaty changes, and to the legislative or budgetary cycles, meaning that the presidency agendas might be much fuller and inflexible when a new multiannual financial framework must be agreed upon, while presidencies at the beginning of the cycle have more liberty to set their agendas and priorities. External factors include unforeseen or unexpected events that can dictate or reformulate the priorities of the presidency. To illustrate these, Table 4.1 contextualizes the seven presidencies that will be analyzed in detail later.

This chapter focuses on the administrative challenge of the Council presidency largely skipping the political aspects of the institution such as agenda-setting powers or success at EU level. However, to just briefly touch upon them, the vast majority of the civil servants interviewed for this chapter underlined that their presidencies were strictly acting as neutral brokers and following the agenda outlined by the European Commission and the presidency trio, prioritizing the continuity of EU policy process over national priorities. As they noted, for small MS, the reputational losses relating to pushing their own interest instead of adhering to the norm of the neutral broker outweigh the potential benefits, especially considering that not even the largest MS manage to push their unilateral priorities during their respective presidencies without damaging their reputation.⁹

Furthermore, as noted earlier, the presidency agendas are largely predetermined by the EU legislative agenda and, to an extent, by external factors and events. For

Table 4.1 Summary of the cases

Presidency	Domestic factors	EU-level factors	External factors
Ireland 2013	Recent economic crisis; Demotivated administration; Limited human/material resources	End of EU legislative cycle; First post-Lisbon presidency	-
Lithuania 2013	Recent economic crisis; Limited material resources	End of EU legislative cycle; First presidency	Snowden scandal; Maidan events in Ukraine
Latvia 2015	National election; Limited material resources; Some Euroscepticism	First presidency	Charlie Hebdo attacks; Refugee crisis
Luxembourg 2015	Small administration; Pro-European population	First post-Lisbon presidency	Refugee crisis (quotas)
Netherlands 2016	Large administration; Euroscepticism	First post-Lisbon presidency	Refugee crisis; Brussels attacks
Slovakia 2016	Limited human resources; National election	First presidency	Refugee crisis
Malta 2017	Limited human resources; National election	First presidency	Refugee crisis; Brexit

Source: Own compilation based on interview data

instance, looking at the number of legislative acts passed, the Lithuanian 2013 presidency is an absolute leader among the seven cases, but that is to a large extent because there were just so many acts on the agenda that could not be postponed and had to be passed before the end of the financial cycle, and also the MS were respectively keener on compromising to move the process forward rather than blocking it based on their national preferences.¹⁰

Finally, measuring the political achievements of the Council presidency is also somewhat subjective because the Council General Secretariat (CGS) and EU as a whole is interested in maintaining a smooth legislative process, and so there are a number of checks and balances to ensure a smooth handover and negotiation of files, such as assistance from the experienced CGS staff or handover of specific portfolios to more experienced trio partners. For example, Malta took over the negotiation of many maritime issues from Slovakia, which is a landlocked country. As seen earlier, the political achievements and agendas of the rotating presidencies are a mix of a variety of factors, only a few of them controlled by the incumbent MS.

4.4 The concept of administrative capacity

Literature on small state participation in EU affairs identifies structural disadvantages faced by the small states as well as factors necessary for successful participation in the EU policy-making process (Panke, 2010a, 2010b, 2010c; Thorhallsson, 2006; Thorhallsson and Wivel, 2006). The concept of administrative capacity,

employed as the dependent variable, is based on a combination of these factors as identified by Panke (2010a, 2010c). The key structural disadvantage of small states in the EU is fewer human and material resources both at the national ministries and Permanent Representations in Brussels. A lack or limited number of skilled experts and leaner EU policy coordination structures complicate the timely shaping of high-quality national positions for Council negotiations. Furthermore, for the same reason small states also have weaker networks with EU institutions and interest groups, complicating access to relevant information, and, as a result, are also less reputable. Finally, less established or stable EU policy coordination systems, lack of experience due to shorter duration of EU membership and even leaner resources constitute additional structural disadvantages for ‘new’ MS (Dimitrova and Toshkov, 2007; Gärtner et al., 2011; Panke, 2010a).

Administrative capacity here stands for the combination of requirements for an MS to successfully engage in EU policy-making. It serves as an aggregate dependent variable, while the EU Council presidency is the independent variable. Administrative capacity is conceptualized through a new institutionalist theory commonly used for the study of Europeanization and the impact of European integration on the MS. It combines rational choice (RCI), sociological (SI) and historical institutionalist (HI) approaches. The main logic behind RCI is that of consequentiality and cost-benefit consideration in decision-making. Actor preferences are fixed and individualistic. SI puts a strong emphasis on logic of appropriateness and behaviour led by adherence to norms and values rather than consequentiality. Actor preferences are flexible and can be changed by their environments through learning or socialization. HI emphasizes path dependency and legacy of past choices in shaping actor behaviour. Their preferences can be either fixed or flexible but also impacted and shaped by past decisions (Börzel and Risse, 2003; Checkel, 2001; Hall and Taylor, 1996; Peters, 2012). Administrative capacity here combines the institutional set-up for the presidency in the MS (explained by RCI) and soft skills of the civil servants involved (explained by SI), as well as institutional memory (reflected in HI). Institutional set-up includes material and human resources allocated for the presidency, new coordination practices between the institutions involved and creation of new institutional structures. Soft skills comprise attitudes, motivation and skills of the civil servants as well as their contact networks at national and EU levels. Institutional memory reflects EU membership duration and previous presidency experience. The concept is elaborated in Figure 4.1.

I expect that holding the rotating EU Council presidency should strengthen the administrative capacity of the respective MS, at least temporarily, but also in a long-term perspective. In addition, the impact of the presidency on the administrative capacity should be stronger in small MS with no previous presidency experience since they cannot build on institutional memory and therefore the learning effect and socialization are likely to be greater. Finally, the chapter seeks to find out which strand of institutional theory, sociological, rational choice or historical institutionalism, explains the impact of the Council presidency better and to what

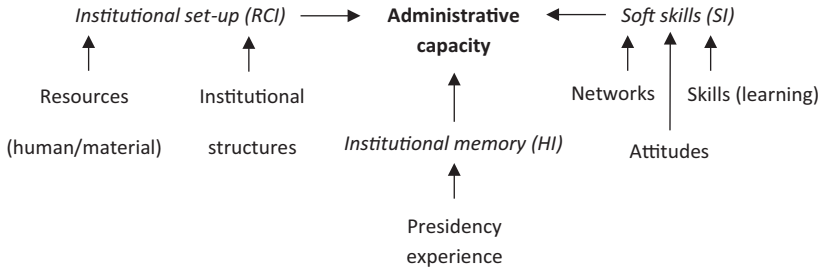


Figure 4.1 Defining administrative capacity. Source: Own elaboration

extent, as the findings might reveal that, for example, no institutional changes took place or that historical memory did not play a significant role in the preparation and conduct of the analyzed presidencies. Having only one case of a larger MS in the sample introduced in the next subsection does not allow a thorough comparison of small-large MS presidencies but it might help to flag some of the small-state-specific challenges for future research.

4.5 Case selection and data

Six cases in this comparative study, namely Ireland, Lithuania, Latvia, Luxembourg, Slovakia and Malta, were selected based on a most similar logic holding the small size of the MS as well as recent presidency experience constant (George and Bennett, 2005; Seawright and Gerring, 2008). Previous presidency experience is the variable that differs among the cases, dividing them into two ‘old’ and four ‘new’ MS. Furthermore, the focus is placed on the small MS in order to allow in-depth analysis of the cases where the impact of the Council presidency is most likely to be notable. The Netherlands was added to the sample as an example of a much larger MS with previous presidency experience to see whether a difference between small and large MS presidencies is really apparent expanding the sample of ‘old’ MS to three.

The empirical basis of the chapter consists of semi-structured interviews with 97 public servants from the seven countries as well as an analysis of reports, programmes, legal documents and media coverage of the seven presidencies. The interviews were conducted between March 2016 and May 2017 as well as in the summer of 2022. Interviewees were selected based on their tasks and working positions during the Council presidency: high-level diplomats at Permanent Representations in Brussels, representatives from key national ministries and representatives of presidency coordinating institutions. It should be underlined that due to the research design building mainly on expert interviews there may be a positive bias and, despite triangulation of interview findings and a large number of respondents, the impact of the Council presidency might be overstated. A breakdown of interviewees by country and target group is presented in Table 4.2.

Table 4.2 Breakdown of interviews

Country	Timing	Interviewees	By institution Permanent Representation	National ministries	Coordinating institutions
Ireland	Jan 2017	14	7	6	1
Lithuania	Mar–Apr 2016	19	8	9	2
Latvia	Apr 2016	17	2	11	4
Luxembourg	Jan–Feb 2017	12	3	6	3
Netherlands	Jan–Mar 2017	12	6	5	1
Slovakia	Jan, May 2017	18	8	8	2
Malta	May–Sep 2022	5	2	-	3
Total		97	35	44	18

Source: Own data

4.6 Preparation and conduct of a Council presidency

The key aspects of the preparation and conduct of the Council presidencies by the seven MS are summarized in Table 4.3 based on interview insights and respective presidency reports. The table points to a difference between the small states and the larger ones, especially when looking at human resources. In addition, there are several differences in how ‘old’ and ‘new’ MS prepare and hold their presidencies.

Overall, it is notable that the presidencies indeed entail a similar scope of tasks regardless of the size of the MS or its administration, as can be seen by roughly similar budgets with the exceptions of Malta being the least costly and Luxembourg the most. These can be explained by some country-specific decisions, such as cost-cutting event organization and transportation solutions in the small city of Valetta, or no need for separate English-language training for the Maltese civil servants, for example. The other significant aspect determining the budgets in the other MS was the extent of training needed (more elaborate and extensive programmes were organized in the ‘new’ MS) and the possibility to fund it from the European Social Fund (ESF), which allowed to significantly cut the costs in Lithuania and Slovakia but not in Latvia.

It is apparent that the ‘new’ MS invest more in the development of their administrative capacity than their ‘old’ counterparts from a rational choice institutionalist perspective. Most of them start preparations earlier, set up separate coordinating institutions, hire more additional staff and invest in extensive centralized training programmes for the presidency staff, instead of largely learning-by-doing and building on institutional memory and existing structures in ‘old’ MS. The learning-by-doing, relying on existing structures, and redeploying existing rather than hiring new staff, was also very notable in the Netherlands, the one larger MS, showing that for larger administrations the presidency indeed is a less disruptive experience than for the small ones.

During the presidency, ‘new’ MS seem to get greater returns from the sociological institutionalist perspective, namely in networking and institutional learning, catching up in experience and expertise with their ‘older’ counterparts. The Council presidency is still an important tool for re-engagement with the EU for ‘old’ MS but a real ‘eye opener’ for the ‘new’ ones, having a stronger overall impact on the latter and showing how the historical institutionalist component, namely previous presidency experience, influences administrative capacity building before and during the presidency to an extent. ‘Old’ MS had to adjust to the Lisbon Treaty changes and establish a closer working relationship with the European Parliament, but for the ‘new’ MS the presidency constituted a crucial learning experience, even identified as ‘taking off the newcomer’s hat,’ ‘the graduation exam’ for the ‘new’ MS.¹¹

4.7 Long-term impact of the Council presidency

This section addresses any lasting impact of the rotating EU Council presidency on national administrations. Table 4.4 provides a summary of the impact of holding

Table 4.3 Summary of the findings

	Preparation timing (years)	Presidency budget (million €)	Coordination structures	Human Resources (ministries)	Human Resources (Permanent Representation)	Training	Learning (institutional)	Coordination/ networking
Ireland 2013	3	60	Prime Minister's Office	Few staff hired, temporary redeployment of existing staff, calling experts back from retirement	From 100 to 180 people (almost doubled)	Learning on the job/CGS seminars	Introducing new generation of civil servants/ to EU affairs/ learning post-Lisbon processes/not a major eye opener	Re-engagement with EU institutions
Lithuania 2013	6	63	Designated temporary department at MFA	Centrally assigned quotas for additional (mostly administrative) staff at the ministries, temporary liaison officers	From 80 to 200 people (doubled to tripled)	Centralized training programme funded by ESF/CGS seminars; English and French classes	Thoroughly learning about how EU works, especially informal practices	Establishing crucial contacts with EU institutions
Latvia 2015	3	82	Independent temporary institution	Only a few administrative staff hired, liaison volunteer programme, internships	From 60 to 185 people (tripled)	Centralized training programme/ CGS seminars; English classes	Thoroughly learning about how EU works, especially informal practices	Establishing crucial contacts with EU institutions

Luxembourg 2015	3	93	EU Affairs department, MFA	About 200 people (2–3 per cent of civil service) hired on two-year contracts	From 80 to 140 people (almost doubled)	Learning on the job/CGS seminars	Learning post-Lisbon processes/not a major eye opener	Refreshing contact networks with EU institutions
Netherlands 2016	3	63	MFA	Few staff hired, temporary redeployment of existing staff, extended traineeship programme	From 100 to 180 people (almost doubled)	Learning on the job/short seminars/ CGS seminars	Learning post-Lisbon processes/not a major eye opener	Refreshing contact networks with EU institutions
Slovakia 2016	5	70	Designated temporary department at MFA	Centrally assigned quotas for additional (mostly administrative) staff at the ministries	From 70–80 to 220 people (tripled)	Centralized training programme funded by ESF/CGS seminars; English classes	Thoroughly learning about how EU works, especially informal practices	Establishing crucial contacts with EU institutions
Malta 2017	3	40	Ministry for European Affairs	Substantial number of staff hired, also internally from other ministries	N/A (substantially increased capacity)	Centralized training by external contractors/ ministry training	Thoroughly learning about how EU works, especially informal practices	Establishing crucial contacts with EU institutions

Source: Own elaboration based on interview data and presidency reports: Irish Presidency of the Council of the European Union (2013); Latvian Presidency of the Council of the European Union (2015); LR Užsienio Reikalų Ministerija (2014); Slovak Council Presidency (2016)

Table 4.4 Summary of the findings regarding the long-term impact of the Council presidency

	Rational choice institutionalism Structures	Coordination/ communication practices	Staff	Sociological institutionalism Networks	Skills	Attitudes
Ireland 2013	Capital: dismantled Only committees remained Perm rep: size back to normal	Improvement	No measures to retain additional staff; civil servants largely remained	Re-engagement (crucial after crisis)	Improvement	Motivational boost
Lithuania 2013	Capital: dismantled Perm rep: size back to normal	Improvement	No measures to retain additional staff (only competitive advantage); civil servants largely remained	Emergence	Notable improvement	Substantive change
Latvia 2015	Capital: dismantled Perm rep: size back to normal	Improvement	No measures to retain additional staff (only competitive advantage); civil servants largely remained	Emergence	Notable improvement	Substantive change
Luxembourg 2015	Capital: lean to begin with, dismantled. Perm rep: size back to normal	Marginal improvement	Hiring suspended to retain additional staff; civil servants largely remained	Re-engagement	Minor improvement	Little change

Netherlands 2016	Capital: lean to begin with, dismantled Perm rep: size back to normal	Marginal improvement	No measures to retain additional staff (only extended traineeships); civil servants largely remained.	Re-engagement (temporary)	Minor improvement	Little change
Slovakia 2016	Capital: dismantled Perm rep: size back to normal	Improvement	No measures to retain additional staff (only competitive advantage); civil servants largely remained	Emergence	Notable improvement	Substantive change
Malta 2017	Capital: dismantled (Ministry for European Affairs merged with the MFA) Perm rep: size back to normal	Little impact	No measures to retain additional staff (only competitive advantage); civil servants largely remained	Emergence	Notable improvement	Substantive change

Source: Own elaboration based on interview data

the rotating EU Council presidency on national administrations structuring it by the main RCI and SI components of the concept of administrative capacity (previous presidency experience and HI were largely discussed in the previous section).

In all the seven MS presidency coordination institutions were dismantled after the presidency. Civil servants returned from presidency coordination to their initial roles; the separate institutions established by Lithuania, Latvia and Slovakia were dismantled; in other countries EU policy coordination practices went back to normal. In Malta, the Ministry for European Affairs that coordinated the presidency was merged with the Ministry of Foreign affairs within a couple of years succeeding the event.¹² However, civil servants built up lasting personal contact networks among themselves and with the other national ministries that were valuable for several years after the presidencies. A better understanding of how other line ministries work and coordinate EU affairs emerged. Furthermore, extensive experience in logistical planning and event management obtained through the presidency was useful for similar future obligations in other international organizations (OECD or NATO), although none can quite compare to the presidency in scope and intensity.¹³

The Council presidency also contributed to capacity building in national ministries, even though to a limited extent. Only the administration of Luxembourg made conscious effort to retain staff temporarily hired and trained for the presidency in the civil service. In the other six MS, the presidency certainly served as a stepping stone into the civil service for numerous young professionals and the experience gained helped them pass civil service selection procedures.¹⁴ Intensive work with the presidency dossiers and coordination, as well as training, led to improved competence and knowledge of EU institutions and processes among the civil servants at the national ministries. Since the presidency only repeats every 13–14 years, it is to introduce a new generation of civil servants to EU affairs in the ‘old’ MS.¹⁵ More importantly, it notably changed the attitudes of civil servants in the ‘new’ MS holding their first presidencies. Multiple interviewees reported that only after the presidency did the understanding that EU issues are an integral part of domestic policy-making emerge.¹⁶ The Council presidency did not change much in the institutional set-up or working practices at the national ministries apart from some adjustments in communication and information sharing practices. However, it greatly enhanced competence in EU matters and confidence among the civil servants. In the ‘old’ MS the presidency meant a re-engagement with the EU institutions and a re-establishment of closer contacts with them. For the first-time presidencies it was a major eye opener on how EU institutions and legislative processes work from the ‘insider’ perspective. They acquired knowledge of both formal and informal ways of influencing the EU agenda and built up contact networks with high-level officials at EU institutions that would be unattainable in other ways. All of these contributed to small, especially the ‘new’ MS obtaining more skills and tools to shape better national positions at EU level and make their voices heard.

Finally, at all the Permanent Representations, the nature and the load of work, as well as staff numbers, went back to levels that prevailed before the presidency, with the exception of the Dutch and Slovak Permanent Representations. The Dutch

Permanent Representation decreased in size due to budget cuts and the Slovak slightly expanded and restructured. All the seven MS adopted a Brussels-based presidency model giving greater autonomy to the Permanent Representations, and all returned to more capital-based practices, dropped their neutral broker roles and shifted back to representation of national interests immediately after their presidencies. However, in all the cases, new and faster communication channels with the capitals remained in place (regular videoconferences or frequent distribution of short flash notes). Furthermore, both respondents from 'old' and 'new' MS 'built up muscles in Brussels'¹⁷ through establishing extensive and close contact networks with EU institutions and interest representatives, who normally rarely proactively approach small states if they are not holding the presidency. The diplomats acting as working party chairs improved their negotiation, brokering and coalition-building skills. The presidency was an enormous learning experience for diplomats from first-time presidencies. Having chaired Council meetings, participated in trialogues and represented the Council at the EP, they agree that only after the presidency does their country feel like a full member of equal standing of the European Union.

Overall, from the RCI perspective, in terms of changes in institutional structures, staff numbers or coordination practices are less apparent in national administrations. However, the Council presidency does constitute a crucial mechanism of socialization (SI), especially in the 'new' MS. While institutional memory (HI) is helpful in presidency preparation and conduct, it does not impact the results or the achievements.

4.8 Conclusion

Connecting the findings to the theoretical argument and the concept of administrative capacity, it is notable that the presidency fulfils a strong socialization function in national administrations, rather than leading to any lasting institutional change in coordination structures and practices. It is 'not the structure, but the quality of EU issue coordination that changes after the presidency.'¹⁸ These findings point out that long-term Europeanization of national administrations through holding the EU Council presidency is predominantly apparent through the sociological institutionalist perspective. On the rational choice side, only minor adjustments of administrative capacity, such as communication practices between the institutions, have lasting value. In that sense, capitalizing on the aftermath of the presidency can be seen as a wasted opportunity to an extent. From a historical institutionalist perspective, there is a difference between 'old' and 'new' MS, with the latter reporting greater returns from the presidency and a stronger impact on administrative capacity, along with more investments into the preparation process.

In terms of size, it is evident that the presidency poses a bigger challenge for small MS if one compares the effort and energy the Netherlands invested in covering all the dossiers and tasks to what the smaller administrations did. The Dutch presidency largely made do with own resources while the smaller administrations needed to plan more extensively, hire more staff or rely on external support.

However, with a number of mitigation strategies in place, size did not seem to impact the quality of small state presidencies in any way. If anything, it might have served as an advantage, since smaller states are used to collaboration and coalition building and therefore make better neutral brokers, which is a crucial role for a successful and effective Council presidency.

Furthermore, the Council presidency is an unprecedented experience for both ‘old’ and ‘new’ MS. However, it certainly contributes more to capacity building in the ‘new’ MS. A common experience among the first-time presidencies is that ‘you only become a normal EU Member State after the presidency [. . .], there certainly is an effect of taking off a newcomer hat in all countries.’¹⁹ Civil servants from the ‘new’ MS agreed that it is impossible to fully understand how EU institutions function, especially behind the scenes, without having held the Council presidency.²⁰ While respondents from experienced MS also reported learning a lot about cooperation with the EP and the changes introduced by the Lisbon Treaty, the effect of the presidency was weaker than in the countries that held the position for the first time.

These findings provide a contribution to the long-going debate about the necessity and the use of the institution of the rotating EU Council presidency. Both academics and policy-makers criticized the chair held by a different party every six months as an unsuitable leadership structure for the European Union of 28 MS, for lacking accountability, disrupting the continuity of policy-making and being a costly burden for the MS, or a powerless institution since the Lisbon Treaty reforms (Crum, 2009). However, the findings of this research indicate that, despite being costly and very occasional experience, the Council presidency still fulfils an important socializing function within the national administrations bringing the allegedly remote ‘Brussels affairs’ closer to the MS. As noted by one of the interview respondents, ‘The presidency is an important piece in turning the “they” to “we”.’²¹

Notes

- 1 I define small states as those having a lesser than average population of the EU. This relative definition of smaller than average in a regional construct in question was adopted from Panke and Gurol (2019).
- 2 Following my definition of a small state having a lesser than average population of the EU, the Netherlands constitutes the smallest large state falling at just above the EU-27 average of 16.5 million with its 17.5 million inhabitants.
- 3 Since the ‘old’ and ‘new’ member state distinction may appear outdated at this day, two decades after the Eastern enlargement of the EU, I opt for quotation marks to simply and quickly distinguish between member states that joined the EU before and after May 2004.
- 4 Interview, with representative from LT.
- 5 Except for the Foreign Affairs Council as of Lisbon Treaty reforms in 2009.
- 6 As it was still EU-28 at the time of research, it was left unchanged here.
- 7 Interviews with representatives from IE, LT, LV, LU, SK, NL.
- 8 Interviews with representatives from IE, LT, LV, SK.
- 9 Interview with representatives from IE, LT, LV, LU, MT.
- 10 Interview with representative from LT.
- 11 Interviews with representatives from LT, LV, SK.

- 12 Interview with representative from MT.
- 13 Interviews with representatives from IE, LT, LV, LU, NL, SK.
- 14 Interviews with representatives from LT, LV, SK.
- 15 Interview with representative from IE.
- 16 Interviews with representatives from IE, LT, LV, LU, SK.
- 17 Interview with representative from LT.
- 18 Interview with representative from LT.
- 19 Interviews with representatives from LT, LV.
- 20 Interview with representative from LV.
- 21 Interview with representative from IE.

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