

Small Countries' EU Council Presidency and the Realisation of their National Interests: The Case of Slovenia

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Abstract

The main goal of the article is to establish how a small country, Slovenia, promoted its national interests when it held the Presidency of the Council of the EU, how this experience fits into the theory of small states and what lessons can be drawn for other small states. Based on a questionnaire administered to key Slovenian actors in the presidency, the analysis confirmed some of the theoretical expectations and revealed certain disparities. Our analysis confirms theoretical predictions that a member state can push through its national interests more easily during its presidency because it possesses certain powers that enable it to set the agenda, which is the most effective way of realising national interests. Especially true in the case of small state presidencies, advocating national interests can also be facilitated by a smaller range of priorities and a greater level of coincidence with the interests of other key actors. We revealed that, besides the country's size, other factors also limited its ability to fulfil its national interests. In addition to a weak ability for coalition building and lobbying, the two main factors of constraint were the lack of soft knowledge among Slovenian officials and weak coordination among policy agents.

KEY WORDS:

national interest; Presidency of the Council of the EU; small states; Slovenia

Introduction

The enforcement of national interests has been a key issue of the modern international community, especially following the end of the Cold War. Prior to the collapse of the bipolar world order, international relations were mainly explained in terms of realist theory with the *zero sum game* concept. The collapse of the bipolar world order and emergence of a multitude of newly formed small states led these states, because of a lack of hard sources of power, to rely more on *soft power* (Nye 1991 2004). Large states also began to rely on soft power but not due to the absence of hard power. Small states have obviously limited internal and external resources to help them pursue their own (foreign policy) interests (e.g. Hey 2003). To overcome their small size, they use other forms of structural power (Strange 1995) such as the *agenda-setting* process which Keohane and Nye (1989) regard as one of the key sources of power in the modern international community.

The article combines the theoretical framework concerning the realisation of the national interests of small EU member states during the Presidency of the Council of the European Union (EU Council)¹ with empirical findings based on an analysis of the Slovenian EU Council Presidency of 2008.

This prestigious assignment, which Slovenia assumed in January 2008, served as recognition of that nation's statehood and successful integration into the EU. Becoming integrated into Europe was one of the main political goals of Slovenia even before it gained its independence. Special directives on how to adjust to Europe and checking whether its legislation was in line with EU directives were introduced already in 1990 when Slovenia was still part of Yugoslavia (see Svetličič 1989; Kirn 2012). Already during the accession negotiations, Slovenia showed a high level of engagement that led to its successfully joining the EU in May 2004. Slovenia was constantly reaffirming its EU commitment, first with its rapid entry to the euro zone in January 2007, and subsequently by joining the Schengen area later that same year. Representing the last challenge and necessary experience that set it apart from the old member states, Slovenia was aware that the presidency would not be an easy task.

¹ The term "the Council of the EU" is not completely accurate, although we decided to use it since the Slovenian Presidency took place before the Lisbon Treaty and the changes it brought to the configuration of the Council.

The challenge was threefold because, firstly, the Slovenian Presidency had to prove that after the closure of the 2004 and 2007 enlargement processes the new member states were suitable not only to belong to the club, but also to lead it. Secondly, with the new system of a rotating presidency, Slovenia had to show that small new EU members could also be good chairs. Thirdly, being part of the first presiding trio, Slovenia's Presidency also had to help justify the "trio team presidency system in terms of coherence and consistency in EU policies, not only by carrying out the programme but also by keeping the trio's priorities high on the agenda" (Kajnc 2009: 89).

The originality of this article lies in its methodological approach. This is namely the first empirical evaluation based on a survey among actors of the first presiding newcomer member state that formed part of the first trio.² It sheds new light on the role of the presidency of small states when small new members are in the seat and the presidency is conducted in the new, trio form. Most authors dealing with the EU have not put the issue of national interest in the forefront. They have predominantly based their approach on the legal basis of the presidency, including the norms guiding and influencing it (see Niemann and Mak 2011) that stipulate the presiding country should be an honest broker and promote community interests rather than national ones. This article makes national interests the focus of its research. In an attempt to be realistic, it establishes through the eyes of the presidency's actors (via survey among them) not only the extent to which these idealistic expectations were met, but also to what extent and how countries nevertheless like to use the presidency as an opportunity to enforce their national interests.

With this focus in mind, the primary goals of this article are (1) to establish whether Slovenia was more successful in realising its national interests as the chair with *agenda-shaping* capacity as compared to the normal EU membership, during its presidency; (2) to examine how Slovenia balanced its national interests with those of other trio and other EU member states; and (3) to determine whether the Slovenian Presidency provides some new theoretical insights. The analysis is based on a quantitative method (survey) conducted among the Slovenian actors involved in the presidency. The data were analysed from two main aspects: the extent to

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2 More on the role of the trio in: Udovič and Svetličič, 2014.

which the theoretical premises about small states' behaviour concerning the realisation of national interests during the EU Council Presidency can explain Slovenia's behaviour and the extent to which the realisation of national interests was the result of Slovenia's proactive ability rather than the interplay of the interests of other EU actors.

The article is divided into five parts. The first two sections present the theoretical framework for discussing the EU Council Presidency in light of national interests. The next section presents the methodology along with the results of the empirical research. The last part sets out the main conclusions with lessons learned for small country presidencies in general.

A. Literature Review

A.1. National Interests

The definition of national interests remains a complex and under-researched topic in the social sciences. It is difficult to objectively define because of the involvement of subjective interests, the complexity and changeability of the issue over time and the difficulties of distinguishing subjective interests from public interests. Consequently, because theorists are far from united, there is a plurality of (sometimes opposing) definitions, including the following:

1. National interests are objectively determined and exist independently of subjects that are only able to recognise this objectivity. Morgenthau (1951; 1995) claims national interests are defined by power.
2. National interests cannot be objectively defined (Aron 1975). Their interpretation can only be subjective since they represent the sum of individual interests that reflect their preferences and derive from their values, making it impossible to measure them objectively.
3. Objective and subjective national interests are two different kinds of interests (Miletić 1978).

4. There is a dialectic unity of subjective and objective views whereby one has to be aware that national interests are usually defined by governments/elites (McLean 1996).

Roskin (1994: 36) posits that "national interest may be difficult to define due to the warping effects of ideology, the global system, public and elite convictions, the mass media, and policy inertia". Many are therefore against the concept of national interest in general.³ Firstly, because the term "national interest" is ambiguous—it is difficult to define it clearly and it is uncertain with regard to the relationship between particular interests and the national interest. Secondly, the concept does not provide a clear guide to the formulation of foreign policy⁴ and "it may encourage an attitude of narrow nationalism" (Morgenthau 1951: 6; Frankel 1970: 42–43; Clinton 1994: 21–22).

In general, we can distinguish four schools of thought regarding national interests, ranging from those claiming that it is something objectively given to those claiming that it is something subjectively constructed. Realists traditionally, and constructivists more recently, claim that the national interest is a key explanatory tool in the analysis and understanding of contemporary foreign policy. Realists like Morgenthau believe that national interests are constant, are objectively given and do not vary in time and space (see also Waltz 1979). According to a realist view, EU decision-making attributes greater power to larger states (e.g. Pedersen 1998). According to liberalism, states could no longer rely on simple power politics in an interdependent world and should (according to the idealist approach) act ethically in the international arena. A subjectivist sees national interests as a sum of individual preferences. The constructivist school (Wendt 1992) argues that interests are created in the interactions among actors and are not given.

National interests help states define themselves in relation to their external environment through: (1) the power they possess to define and enforce those interests (Morgenthau 1995) and (2) their ability to translate them

3 Rosenau (1980: 284–286) claims that "the national interest is 'essentially erroneous'". He recalled that the national interest is rooted in values and that different states do in fact pursue different ends. Kratochwill (1982) suggests defining national interest as analogous to public interest although his contribution is in fact differentiating between the two.

4 Our approach is broader, encompassing not only foreign but also other policies established to promote the well-being of the population.

into viable national policy guidelines (Plano and Olton 1988). Inevitably, national interests differ on the basis of a country's size, which makes size an important factor; namely, it raises the question of differences in ability and, consequently, in the ways and means small and large states pursue their national interests (Svetličič 2002). This is reflected in the behavioural dynamics of EU membership, not only during regular membership but especially at a time of chairing the EU Council.

A.2. National Interests, the EU Council Presidency and the Role of Small States

The preconditions for successfully realising a country's national interests are undeniably its influence and power. EU member states can derive these from either formal or informal power sources (Wallace 1985), giving them a certain leverage over negotiation outcomes. Regardless of size, this leverage increases significantly during the time they hold the EU Council Presidency. However, size plays an important role because it determines member states' presidencies and their ability to pursue and realise their national interests as chairs. To establish the role of size in determining member states' behaviour in negotiations and the way they pursue national interests during the EU Council Presidency, it is first necessary to focus on the theoretical dilemma concerning the (un)privileged role of the presidency in pursuing a state's national interests.

A.2.1. *The role of the presidency and the realisation of national interests*

In theory, the pursuit of national interests during the presidency can come into question since "it is almost a precondition for the successful fulfilment of its functions, and in particular the brokerage role, that the Presidency does not use its position as Chair in negotiations to promote special national interests.⁵ Instead, "it must adhere to the Council's rules of procedure, which demand neutrality" (Kietz 2008: 10). When at the helm, member states have certain limitations on pursuing their national interests. Their behaviour as chair is curbed by formal decision rules for the adoption of proposals and informal norms of neutrality, impartiality, effectiveness (Tallberg 2004) and consensus-building (Elgström 2006; Thomson 2011: 244).

5 After analysing eight Council presidents, Kirchner (1992: 114) concluded that "most appeared prepared, to a considerable extent, to put the Community interest above the national interest".

Because they are judged for their “productivity”, presidencies sometimes compromise their own national preferences to ensure deals are agreed (Peterson and Bomberg 1999). It may nevertheless be expected that all states want to pursue their national interests during their presidencies at least to some extent (Tallberg 2004; Schout and Vanhoonacker 2006). They try to make some national imprint by launching their own policies or initiatives. To be successful, they must be able to present such interests as also being common EU interests, which gives them the support of other members.

When holding the presidency, member states can materialise national interests by carrying out the following roles: administrative and coordinative, agenda-setting (standing out as the most important instrument), mediating, leadership and representative.

The perception of the EU Presidency varies with the author’s position. Some regard the presidency as “responsibility without power” (Dewost 1984: 2), while others claim that the EU Presidency puts member states in a privileged position, enabling them to choose whether to use the presidency as an “amplifier” of their own interests or as “silencer” of these interests (Bengtsson et al. 2004) by giving priority to the common European interests.

Some go even further by arguing that the presidency undisputedly influences negotiations and decision-making through the agenda-shaping process (Tallberg 2003a, 2003b; Warntjen 2007);⁶ namely, the presidency enjoys certain prerogatives of steering the Council’s legislative work (Warntjen 2007). These prerogatives include additional power resources such as asymmetrical access to information and asymmetrical control of the negotiating processes (Tallberg 2003a, 2003b, 2004, 2006). They enable the presidency to influence the pace of negotiations despite the agenda it inherits. Through agenda-setting, mediation and good negotiation skills, the presidency can regulate the intensity of discussion on a particular dossier and the way of introducing (or even omitting) certain policy issues from institutional negotiation.

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6 Besides adding policies to the agenda, the presidency has the power of agenda-shaping which includes agenda-setting, agenda-structuring, and agenda-exclusion (Tallberg 2003a, 2003b, 2006). The presidency can either push forward or neglect certain policy proposals or areas. This influence is usually defined by the national preferences of an individual presiding country (Tallberg 2003a).

Empirical studies (Schalk et al. 2007; Thomson 2008; Warntjen 2008) also confirmed that the country's influence on the negotiation outcomes is greater during its time at the helm. However, this influence is mostly dependant on external factors⁷ and not so much on the presidency's engagement in the negotiation processes. Thomson (2008: 611–612) stresses that the presiding country can influence the timing of the legislative process, but it has little influence over the duration of decision-making or the content of policy outcomes. Therefore, the discretion that Council presidents have to shape the agenda is indeed limited, mostly also due to the short six-month tenure and the inherited agenda.

Despite these constraints, the Council presidency gives incumbent member states a resource with which they can influence decision outcomes in line with their preferences (e.g. Tallberg 2004, 2006: 29–39; Bunse 2009).

Promotion of national interests during the Presidency gained a new dimension with the introduction of the presidency trio⁸ by the Lisbon Treaty. With the treaty, the official roles of the presidency were further reduced by the establishment of the President of the European Council and the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, now chairing the Council in certain formations. These changes greatly affected and restructured the role of the rotating presidency, diminishing its role in the foreign and security arena and shifting its influence more towards the EU's internal level. Not surprisingly, Mazzucelli (2008: 10), for example, calculated that the role of the presidency would be reduced by 10% [in the post Lisbon years]. Brandy (2007: 1) states that "the six-month rotating presidency was acceptable with an EU of 12 or even 15, but is simply impractical in an EU of 27 members". Arregui and Thomson (2009) suggest that the rotating presidency is less relevant in the enlarged EU as it was in the EU-15. Other researchers confirm that the rotating presidency would even in the enlarged EU play an important role in consensus-building (Szabó 2011).

7 According to Thomson (2008: 612) the decision-making process is determined by factors outside of presidents' control: the involvement of the European Parliament, the decision rule in the Council and the polarisation of actors' positions on a legislative proposal.

8 The trio was established to "force" presiding states to pursue common (Community) interests rather than their own. However, after its introduction there were several criticisms that "the institutionalisation of the trio-Presidency with one large state being part of each set can be seen as ensuring that large states' interests are defended at all times" (also through the work of small states in the presidency chair; authors' comment) (Klemenčič 2007, *executive summary*).

In spite of such different views, we can conclude that each presiding country tends to influence the EU agenda. Hence, the main question is realistically not *whether* presiding states pursue national interests, but *how* they try to do it. Do they use both power resources to their advantage by pursuing their own national interests or do they endeavour to realise mainly the common European ones? Here the behaviour of small and large member states varies significantly.

A.2.2. Country size as a factor in presidency behaviour

According to the rationalist approach, the presidency influences the negotiation process using additional power resources, which is typical of large state presidency behaviour. That the presidency uses these resources to pursue its own national interests has been confirmed several times in practice.⁹ On the other hand, the sociological approach claims that the presidency's behaviour harbours compromise and endeavours to realise the common European interests instead of involving its own in the negotiation (Dewost 1984; Wallace 1985; Hayes-Renshaw and Wallace 2006).

Obviously, size determines Presidency behaviour. For large states, "productivity" and the norm of effectiveness are often pretexts for partial behaviour which gains its momentum from the far better use of power resources than small states can afford. The reason is that large member states have interests in basically all policy areas and are generally expected to use the role of chair to pursue their own interests (Bengtsson et al. 2004). Conversely, small states compromise their own national preferences by following in more detail the formal norms of presidency conduct. In addition to their small size, new member states face the challenge of adapting to and integrating into the EU's system of decision-making. The process through which policy demands are transformed into decision outcomes is defined by informal bargaining. To participate effectively in such informal processes, state representatives need strong relationships with representatives of other states. Such relationships take time to form. Consequently, new member states may be at a disadvantage compared to old members, at least in the period soon after their accession. It has been suggested that new member states have not had a marked influence on

⁹ An example of a one-sided and assertive presidency was dealing with the situation in Iraq when Great Britain held it in 1998. For more details on similar cases of assertive presidencies, see Elgström (2003).

decision outcomes (Goetz 2005: 254), which may indicate that they have less power than the old members, but it does not imply that their power is marginal (see Thomson 2011: 188, 199).

Because small states have less specific national interests, this helps them juggle normative behaviour with effectiveness. They can afford to follow the logic of appropriateness, "which increases their credibility in reaching a compromise among the Member States in the Council negotiations" (Kajnič 2008a: 2–3) and which for them, unlike for larger states, represents an additional source of competence.

The fact that they depend a great deal on the assistance of EU institutions¹⁰ and can pursue a more modest number of national interests may not affect the quality of their presidencies. The only difference between small and large states can be seen in the former's different choice of negotiation tactics and use of conflict-avoiding negotiation behaviour as a source of power. Smaller states are forced to prioritise between sectors without damaging their interests, usually remaining proactive and inflexible in their most important sector(s). They generally only focus on one priority (or a few) and, through specialisation (Baillie 1999) dedicate their otherwise limited administrative resources to prepare well in these areas (Klemenčič 2007). Therefore, they are not considered a threat. Others perceive them as weak, which gives them the opportunity to use this non-competitive relationship to their advantage. Because they usually remain in the background, other member states tend to show greater tolerance and understanding when small states want to pursue those few national interests.

Paradoxically, in this case smallness increases the influence and prestige that stem from the institute of the presidency because it enables small states to play the role of a compromise-oriented *honest broker*. This perception not only gives them the necessary legitimacy to run the presidency, but allows them to incorporate some of their national interests within the framework of common (communitarian) interests. Therefore, several analyses (Beach 2004; Quaglia and Moxon-Browne 2006; Schout and Vanhoonacker 2006) have confirmed that small states are in turn more successful when holding the presidency.

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10 Due to limited human resources, small states are far more dependent than large ones on the assistance of the General Secretariat of the Council (GSC) and European Commission (EC). The GSC helps them draw up a much documentation that large states usually prepare on their own, and for small states the EC represents an ally against the influence of large states and an advocate for the common EU interests.

The following sections analyse the Slovenian EU Council Presidency of 2008 to establish if Slovenia conformed with the normative behaviour of small member state presidencies and how that affected the realisation of its national interests.

B. The Slovenian EU Council Presidency of 2008

Slovenia started its presidency in January 2008 as the last country of the first presiding trio.¹¹ Being the first newcomer and one of the smallest countries to have ever held the presidency,¹² Slovenia began its presidency preparations already in 2005, almost two years ahead of the normal practice (Bratkovič, A. 2009, pers. comm., 28 May) and established the organisational structure for the presidency preparations as early as January 2005.¹³

Slovenia chose to have a so-called Brussels-based presidency, making the Permanent Representation (PermRep) in Brussels the core of its presidency activities. This was a good organisational decision because it concentrated the most capable Slovenian officials in a small, yet very flexible and agile nucleus (Mejač, Ž. 2009, pers. comm., 3 June).

Given the modest size of its public administration, Slovenia also had to adjust the organisational structure in the capital. Due to limited human resources, Slovenia optimised the working processes and tried to lessen the effects of the organisational/administrative barriers of its public administration by adapting the structure in three ways, namely by: (1) merging working fields, (2) having one person in charge of several domains

11 "The trio system was agreed at the meeting of Permanent Representatives to the EU in March 2006 and approved by the General Affairs and External Relations Council in June 2006, replacing the previous one-year operational programme and three-year strategic programme for the Union by an 18-month programme of three successive Presidencies" (Kajinč 2008b: 5–6). The first trio presidency took place from January 2007 until June 2008 and was composed of Germany, Portugal and Slovenia.

12 Apart from Luxembourg, which shared the presidency with the Netherlands, Slovenia was the smallest country to have presided over the Council of the European Union.

13 *Decision of the Government of the Republic of Slovenia no. 901-04/2004-2 dated 6 January 2005*. A core working group for the presidency was established in order to coordinate the preparations also at the political level, deciding the programme and its priorities and all decisions having financial consequences. Other countries usually did not have such a high-level political coordination body.

and (3) entrusting the staff with preliminary experience of the field to handle the tasks at hand. Nevertheless, Slovenia still needed external assistance to cover certain areas of EU policies where it was understaffed. This assistance mostly came from the General Secretariat of the Council (GSC) and the European Commission (EC).¹⁴ Such staff limitations were also reflected in the six-month programme of the presidency, during which Slovenia pursued mostly issues that were part of the inherited agenda and limited itself to only one priority of national interest, the Western Balkans.

B.1. National Interest during the Slovenian EU Council Presidency 2008

Accession to the EU and to NATO had been the two primary goals of the Slovenian development strategy¹⁵ and foreign policy towards the EU ever since the 1990s, including the Slovenian Foreign Policy Strategy formulated in 1999 (Bojinović & Požgan 2014).¹⁶ EU membership represented a vital national interest that was also reflected in Slovenia's proactive endeavours during the accession negotiations that brought it the reputation of a "star pupil" (Klemenčič 2007: 12). And the presidency also represented a national interest. The decision to undertake the presidency was supported by the National Assembly already on 17 November 2004, where the programme and presidency priorities were later also presented and debated. The Declaration on the Orientation of the Activities of the Republic of Slovenia within the institution of the EU for the period January 2007 to July 2008 singled out the presidency as one of a number of strategic tasks (Official Journal of the Republic of Slovenia No. 60/2004). As in the case of EU membership, all the political parties were also united in supporting the decision to undertake the presidency. The agreement among all political parties was signed on 17 May 2007 to support the successful Presidency of Slovenia of the EU Council. It stipulated the productive cooperation of

14 For more information, see Cerjak (2010).

15 The first strategy prepared in Slovenia about approaching Europe was the so-called Development Strategy (Potočnik et al. 1995) while the next one, on international economic relations (Bobek et al. 1996), was already entitled *From Associated to Full Membership*. A year later, the Strategy for integration into the EU was prepared and adopted by the Slovenian government (Mrak et al. 1998).

16 After the accession in 2004, Slovenia has not reframed its foreign policy strategy, nor has it declaratively established a platform for the formation of the Slovenia–EU relationship (Šabič and Lange 2014). An attempt to establish a new foreign policy strategy (2010) that would further elaborate the relationship with the EU was unsuccessful. The only link between Slovenian national interests and the EU is the Strategy on the Western Balkans adopted in 2010 (Udovič 2011; Zupančič and Udovič 2011), arguing that Slovenia should serve as a bridge between the EU and Western Balkan countries (see also Udovič and Turnšek 2011).

all parties in formulating the presidency priorities before the government decided on them.

Due to such proactive engagement, Klemenčič (2007) also predicted that Slovenia would use the Presidency as an opportunity “to profile itself within the EU and internationally as a competent, efficient and committed EU Member State”.

Based on the 18-month programme of the presiding trio, Slovenia chose the following five priorities for the term of its presidency:

1. the future of the Union and timely entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty;
2. the successful launch of the new Lisbon Strategy cycle;
3. making a step forward in addressing climate/energy issues;
4. strengthening the European perspective on the Western Balkans; and
5. promoting dialogue between cultures, beliefs and traditions in the context of the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue.¹⁷

According to Kajnc (2009: 89), “While the first three priorities largely form part of the inherited agenda and promoting intercultural dialogue was more of a symbolic effort, the focus on the Western Balkans was a true Slovenian priority”.¹⁸ Even though Slovenia only had this priority that was closely related to its national interest, the overall goal of the presidency was not to come up with endless initiatives, but to “seek to add value by looking across all policy dossiers for linkages and using these to provide a genuine response to globalisation” (Lenarčič 2007).

Even though “some observers had expressed (implicit) doubts prior to January 2008 whether this tiny country would be able to handle the EU

17 More on the priorities of the Slovenian Presidency is available at: http://www.eu2008.si/en/The_Council_Presidency/Priorities_Programmes/indexd41d.html. [accessed 27 March 2014].

18 The Western Balkans was the only true Slovenian priority that did not overlap with the German or the Portuguese programme (Grabnar 2007: 6). Due to Slovenia's proactive role, it reached important milestones in the process of integrating the Western Balkans into Europe, namely the *vizum* liberalisation for all the countries of the region, the signing of the Stabilisation and Accession Agreement with Serbia, solid mediation in handling Kosovo's independence and its recognition and wise protection of national interests (the retention of the ecological fishing zone) during the accession negotiations with Croatia. More in Cerjak (2010).

Presidency”¹⁹ (Šabič 2009: 3), one has to bear in mind that “newcomers historically view their inaugural presidency as a chance to prove their ‘European’ credentials” (Lewis 2006: 15). Therefore, Klemenčič (2007) was right to predict that Slovenia would play it safe during the presidency, but that it would also do anything to at least retain if not further enhance its European reputation.

With the Western Balkans as the only substantive priority, the solid realisation of the presidency and good performance as a presiding country represented for Slovenia a far more important, overarching and pertinent national interest. Therefore, the realisation of national interests in the context of the Slovenian EU Council Presidency should be considered in a much broader sense: not only as foreign policy goals that were explicitly mentioned in the aforementioned strategic documents (Slovenian Development and Foreign Policy Strategy, the Programme and Priorities of the Slovenian EU Presidency), but also as the undeclared, implicit national interests national interests that can be understood as part of the broader development strategy objectives of Slovenia as well as the EU that lead to the well-being of the population.

The six-month programme and the priorities of the Slovenian Presidency can thus be interpreted as contributing also to the general strengthening of European integration and values, the internal consolidation of the EU and regional cooperation.²⁰

In this sense, the article looks at national interests as the general public interest that as such includes everything that enhances the well-being of Slovenian nationals. It is not something declared by a government, political party, ministry or elite, but can vary between different groups. Therefore, such broad conception of national interests was also included in our survey, which was the primary methodological tool (see section C). We did not want to compare the results of the presidency only with the presidency priorities, declared national interests from national strategic documents and development strategies or the trio presidency

19 The *Economist*, for example, remarked that Slovenia really had just one priority for its term: to run it smoothly, or according to one official interviewed by the *Economist*, “just not screw it up”. (*Economist* 2006:51)

20 A more detailed presentation of the Slovenian Presidency priorities and their general contribution to the positive development of the entire EU can be found in the Slovenian six-month programme, available at: http://www.eu2008.si/includes/Downloads/misc/program/Programme_en.pdf [accessed 22 December 2014].

programme. The respondents were asked about their own views of the national interests during their work for the presidency. This gave some interesting and tangible results, namely, that different institutions many times also had different views on national interests and those views were more often than not opposing.

C. Methodology and Research Questions

The empirical part of this article is based on the analysis of a survey conducted among actors involved in the Slovenian Presidency.²¹

The survey was structured around the following three research questions:

1. Was Slovenia able to realise its own interests during its presidency more easily than during the time of normal membership (and if so, to what extent)? Did it do so independently or did it just recognise the communitarian interests and pursue them as such?
2. How did Slovenia as the presiding state balance its own interests with the interests of other, especially larger, EU member states? How did it navigate among the interests of the other trio countries and EU institutions? Did other countries help Slovenia formulate its national interests or did they impede their ability to do so?
3. Did Slovenia's behaviour as the chair reflect the theoretical premises about the realisation of small states' national interests during the presidency of the EU Council or did it deviate from this usual small state behaviour?

Our anonymous electronic survey consisting of 40 questions was conducted by Kajnč and Svetličič between 9 July and 4 September 2008. It was sent directly via the distribution list of the Presidency Human

21 The first results of this survey in view of the realisation of national interests were published in the Slovenian language by Svetličič and Cerjak (2012).

Resources Sub-Group, which included those responsible for substantive dossiers (454 people)²². Separately, the survey was distributed to diplomats and other public servants working on substantive issues at the Permanent Representation of the Republic of Slovenia to the EU (PermRep), and to other diplomatic and consular representations of the Republic of Slovenia (RS) abroad (44 people). In total, the survey was distributed to 667 addressees. We received 407 replies (61%), of which 235 (35%) were fully completed while in 172 cases (26%) the respondents left at least one question unanswered. The survey is biased in the sense that it represents the views of actors directly involved in the activity that is being evaluated as well as an over-representation of foreign policy diplomats.

D. Results of the Slovenian Presidency Survey

Although theoretical opinions on possibilities of realising national interests through agenda-setting during the presidency are split,²³ authors mostly agree that the presidency increases the chances of influencing decision-making, thus helping their realisation. The same ambivalence was reflected in the experiences of the Slovenian respondents. As shown in Table 1, almost a quarter of the respondents claimed that the presidency facilitated the materialisation of Slovenia's national interests (24.6%) and only a small share (7.5%) stated that it made it harder.

22 Respondents were civil servants presiding over working groups, as well as their proxies and experts who cooperated on the dossiers as national delegates.

23 See section A.2.1.

Table 1. How Do You Rate the Difficulty of Advocating Slovenian Interests in the EU during the Time of the Presidency?²⁴

	N	%
<i>There were no specific Slovenian interests in my working area.</i>	76	33.3
<i>Slovenia defended/enforced its interests more easily during the presidency.</i>	56	24.6
<i>Because of the presidency, we had to give priority to interests of the EU.</i>	48	21.1
<i>The presidency had no influence on the difficulty of defending/enforcing Slovenian interests.</i>	31	13.6
<i>Slovenia defended/enforced its interests with more difficulty during the presidency.</i>	17	7.5
Total	228	100.0

At the same time, another 33.3% claimed that Slovenia had no specific interests in their working area, which could question the premise about the facilitated materialisation of national interests. On one hand, this result might partially confirm the theoretical expectation that small states do not have strong interests in a vast range of policies,²⁵ but on the other hand it could be interpreted as an impediment to Slovenia's agenda-setting capabilities.

Being without specific national interests in a vast range of EU issues, Slovenia instead focused on a limited number of areas jointly established by the trio presidency programme.²⁶ A very obvious national interest was to administer the presidency well, to enhance the reputation of Slovenia to be perceived (also thanks to the presidency) "as a truly European star pupil" (anonymous referee observation). This was corroborated by 21.1% of the respondents, who claimed that Slovenia had given priority to EU interests. This has an important consequence, namely that, in order to realise such national interest Slovenia mostly did not have to give up its position in favour of the EU one, which leads us to believe that the 33.3% of respondents without specific national interests in their working area most

24 If not stated otherwise, the tables represent the findings of our survey.

25 It could also reflect poor preparations.

26 Of the trio presidency programme priorities, Slovenia only had one area of true national interest, namely, the future perspective of the Western Balkans (Cerjak 2010). If we consider that multicultural dialogue was more of a symbolic gesture than a real priority, the rest of the priority list was clearly part of the inherited agenda (Kajnc 2009).

likely also followed the European agenda. The same conclusion can be drawn from Table 2, which shows a high level of accordance of Slovenian interests with those of other EU actors.

Table 2. Level of Accordance of Slovenian Interests with Those of Other Actors

	N	I completely agree (%)	I partially agree (%)	I disagree (%)
<i>The interests of Slovenia matched those of the majority of other member states.</i>	221	39.8	55.2	5
<i>The interests of Slovenia matched those of the trio partner states.</i>	210	21.4	61.9	16.9
<i>The interests of Slovenia matched those of the GCS.</i>	209	23.4	58.9	17.7
<i>The interests of Slovenia matched those of the EC.</i>	209	14.8	67.9	17.2
<i>The interests of Slovenia matched those of a particular group of states.</i>	214	28	54.7	17.3

Slovenia's interests matched the most with those of other member states (40%) as well as the GSC and the EC (38% altogether). The latter can be easily explained since in its first-ever residency Slovenia relied substantially on the help of the GSC and EC which is usual in the case of small member states' presidencies (Cerjak 2010) and, consequently, also an expression of the least damaging position in light of a non-existent goal in a particular policy area (as suggested by an anonymous referee). Conversely, there was a slightly lower share of the accordance of interests with other trio countries (21.4%), which could mean that: (1) Slovenia as the last country of that trio instead focused on its own six-month presidency programme; or (2) by the end, most of the programme had already been finalised by Germany and Portugal. Further, considering the low level of support for the claim that Slovenia's interests varied from those of other actors (approximately 15% on average), it can be inferred that the alignment of interests was most likely one reason that facilitated the realisation of Slovenia's national interests during its presidency.

Looking again at the alternative interpretation of the results in Table 1, one can also understand the lack of national interests in a vast range of

fields as a potential impediment to Slovenia's agenda-setting capacity. Intuitively, it would be expected that, when holding the presidency, Slovenia would also have defined positions on issues not directly linked to its national interests since they were indirectly related to the presidency's broad national interests. Therefore, the finding that one-third of officials had no specific interests in their issue areas could be alarming. The lack of clearly defined positions could translate into Slovenia's weak agenda-setting capacity—one of the main mechanisms for realising national interests.

Table 3. Do You Agree with the Following Statements about Agenda Formation in the Council Working Parties?

	N	Yes (%)	No (%)
<i>I determined the agenda according to the programme of the presidency.</i>	152	77.6	22.4
<i>I determined the agenda according to my own judgement.</i>	152	62.5	37.5
<i>I determined the agenda as a combination of priorities arising from the programme of the presidency and Slovenian national priorities.</i>	148	58.1	41.9
<i>The agenda was determined by external events.</i>	148	31.8	68.2
<i>The agenda was mostly influenced by the GCS.</i>	148	23.6	76.4
<i>I did not have a role which included the possibility of shaping the agenda.</i>	144	16.2	84.0
<i>The agenda was mostly influenced by the EC.</i>	147	13.6	86.4
<i>The agenda was determined by the trio.</i>	147	8.2	91.3
<i>The agenda was mostly influenced by the EP.</i>	145	2.1	97.9

Table 3 shows that Slovenia appeared quite sovereign and independent in its agenda-formation capacity. Namely, almost 63% of respondents

claimed that they set the agenda according to their own judgement, whereas 58% of respondents said the agenda-setting was a combination of presidency programme priorities and Slovenian national priorities. This would mean that Slovenia played quite an autonomous role in forming the agenda and that its agenda-setting ability was not affected by its lack of national interests. However, one should also take into consideration the 77.6% of respondents who claimed they determined the agenda in accordance with the presidency programme, which contained among five priorities only one that can be narrowly defined as direct Slovenia national interest (see p. 13). This high figure is not surprising given the conclusions of Table 1 that Slovenia, lacking its own interests, largely followed the EU agenda. Therefore, it can be inferred that the absence of interests in a vast range of issues and alignment with EU interests only gave the illusion of independent agenda-formation. In reality, this duty was quite strongly influenced by the presidency programme, in which Slovenia put more emphasis on European priorities and much less on Slovenian national interests in order to be perceived as a good European. This in turn means that Slovenia's agenda-setting prerogative as the chair was relatively limited, due also to its own inability to put among its own presidency programme priorities that were more of its national interests.

The lack of national interests can also be regarded as being in line with the theoretical postulate that small member states are more effective when holding the presidency. The absence of national interests helped Slovenia gain the trust of other member states, enabling it to close certain dossiers that had been open for a long time and had failed to be adopted during several previous presidencies.²⁷ This subsequently enabled the realisation of another, far greater national interest that was vital for Slovenia, namely, to carry out the presidency project well and without any missteps (Bratkovič, A. 2009, pers. comm., 28 May).

In addition to the lack of national interests, Slovenia encountered some other problems that made it less proactive in fully realising its national interests, and forced it to play the role of an honest broker.

²⁷ Examples of such dossiers were negotiations for the Return Directive, the legislative package for liberalisation of the electricity and gas internal market, confirmation of the mandate to open negotiations on a new agreement between the EU and Russia, and the proposal for the Directive on Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated Fishing (Cerjak 2010).

Table 4. Difficulty of Pursuing National Interests and the Main Problematic Issues of the Slovenian Presidency (in %)

Problem area	Difficulty of pursuing national interests				
	Easier (N = 56)	Harder (N = 17)	No change (N = 31)	There were no specific interests (N = 76)	Priority to EU interests (N = 48)
Human resources deficit	39.3	47.1	48.4	46.1	60.4
Poor vertical cooperation within department	42.9	29.4	48.4	40.8	33.3
Insufficient interdepartmental cooperation	25.0	29.4	51.6	36.8	45.8
Hierarchy within institutions stifled initiative	33.9	35.3	29.0	28.9	31.3
Insufficient knowledge in related fields and awareness of linkages	25.0	35.3	25.8	28.9	22.9
Insufficient information on the substance of relevant issues	19.6	17.6	16.1	27.6	20.8
Internal political problems	26.8	29.4	19.4	19.7	22.9
Unfamiliarity with the EU institutions' functioning	16.1	11.8	12.9	21.1	18.8
Insufficient knowledge in the field of operation	10.7	35.3	16.1	13.2	8.3

Source: Based on our survey and elaborated by Kajnc̃ and Svetliĉiĉ (2009)

A comparative analysis of answers about problematic presidency issues and the difficulty of advocating national interests (Table 4) revealed several obstacles to the performance of Slovenia's Presidency in realising its national interests: (1) human resources deficit (47.1%),²⁸ (2) hierarchy within institutions that stifled initiative (35.3%)²⁹ and (3) insufficient knowledge in related fields which would have enabled linkages (also 35.3%). When linking the last with responses about the lack of knowledge in the field of operation (35.3%), it can be concluded that it was, in fact, the lack of knowledge altogether that was the biggest obstacle.

28 A human resources deficit has been a permanent feature of Slovenia's foreign policy development (Roter 2009). On the other hand, the presidency has been an important element in the socialisation of foreign policy elites (Buniĉ and Šabiĉ 2013).

29 This, together with poor vertical cooperation within the department (42.9%), was also recognised as a major problem by those who claimed that national interests were easier to defend during the presidency.

These were the main problems that prevented Slovenia from successfully pursuing its national interests. By adjusting the organisational structure to avoid the common disadvantages of small states' public administrations, Slovenia tried to deal with some of these issues already in the preparation phase of its presidency. Nevertheless, in Slovenia's case the usual advantages of a small state's public administration (e.g. flexible decision-making and continuity of staff)³⁰ evidently remained relevant issues throughout the entire presidency and affected the realisation of Slovenia's national interests.³¹

Inflexible decision-making and staffing problems in particular affected informal contacts among public servants. In terms of the better realisation of national interests, improved informal communication would have helped identify national interests and bolster more coherent cooperation in their definition and realisation. Our research showed that Slovenia generally had frequent informal contacts, but they were not the most intensive within its own public administration.³²

Table 5. How Regular Were Your Informal Contacts with the Following Actors?

	N	Often or very often (%)	Seldom or very seldom (%)
<i>Representatives of other member states</i>	226	84.5	15.5
<i>Public servants/diplomats of RS</i>	227	77.9	22.0
<i>GSC Officials</i>	224	73.2	26.8
<i>EC Officials</i>	226	71.7	28.3
<i>Interest groups, non-governmental organisations</i>	224	26.8	73.2
<i>Officials and parliamentarians of the EP</i>	221	18.1	81.9

30 See section B.

31 The study of Svetličič and Kajnč (2010) showed that as many as 80% of respondents were convinced that, in the case of the next presidency, an improvement in the cooperation among ministries within the Slovenian public administration as well as between institutions is of the utmost importance.

32 Kajnč and Svetličič (2009) showed that informal contacts were intensive but not satisfactory since 58% of respondents were convinced that networking skills and informal contacts should be improved in the future.

Table 5 demonstrates that Slovenian civil servants had the most frequent contacts with officials of other member states (84.5%) and not with their own public administration (77.9%). While perhaps very small at first glance, the difference still provides us with a valid estimation of the degree of realisation of national interests. One would anticipate that the contacts among Slovenian civil servants would have been the most intense had Slovenia been properly pursuing its national interests.

The frequency of informal contacts with other member states may be understood in two ways: either as a display of the European-oriented nature of the Slovenian Presidency or as Slovenia's proactiveness in using these contacts for information-gathering and better coalition-building.

The latter interpretation is hardly possible since, according to Naurin and Lindahl (2008), Slovenia had poor coalition-building capacity and little appeal as a coalition partner.³³ Therefore, the more intensive contacts with other member states could indicate a more outward pro-European orientation of the Slovenian Presidency, especially since it has been established that Slovenian interests and priorities coincided with those of other European actors to a great extent (Tables 1 and 2). Moreover, since our survey also detected Slovenia's lack of own national interests regarding many policy areas, it is more probable that the frequent informal contacts with other member states were the result of other member states lobbying Slovenia, which by holding the Presidency was the focal point of Council negotiations, rather than a sign of Slovenian proactiveness. This would also explain why contacts with the other member states were more frequent than with either the GSC or the EC.

33 The study from Naurin and Lindahl (2008) on coalition-building in the Council indicated that Slovenia was ranked among the last three member states as regards the coalition potential index.

Table 6. Comparison of the Evaluation of Cooperation with the Slovenian Public Administration (Average Score on a Scale from 1 to 5)

Actors	Evaluation of those who worked on:	
	Relevant dossiers for Slovenia (N = 11)	Irrelevant dossiers for Slovenia (N = 55)
<i>Ministry of origin</i>	4.33	3.48
<i>Other Ministries</i>	3.33	2.90
<i>Government Office for European Affairs (GOEA)</i>	4.17	2.89
<i>Permanent Representation of the Republic of Slovenia to the EU (PermRep)</i>	3.50	3.85
<i>Diplomatic and consular network</i>	3.17	3.26

Source: Kajnč and Svetličič (2009)

There was a significantly higher level of engagement and better evaluation of cooperation of the Slovenian public administration when their officials worked on relevant dossiers (Table 6). This means that Slovenia focused all of its resources on being as successful as possible in those areas where it had some more explicit national interests (e.g. positioning itself as a star pupil, advocating stability, growth and European perspective for the Western Balkans). Conversely, the lower scores given to cooperation on non-priority portfolios (with the exception of the PermRep and the diplomatic and consular network) indicate that these areas were granted less time and attention. The generally lower scores of other ministries can be explained by the problem of fewer informal contacts with the country's own public administration as well as impaired internal institutional cooperation. Further, the deviation of results among respondents from the PermRep suggests that those who possessed more knowledge were less keen to cooperate on the priority portfolios. This may be understood as the manifestation of a critical eye regarding the lack of necessary background expertise to realise national interests in the Slovenian public administration.

E. Conclusion

By presenting a single case study based on the self-evaluation of actors involved in the presidency, our research cannot offer universal lessons. For that we should have evaluated more countries and compared the results of the survey with the analysis of objective criteria for the realisation of national interests. Yet it is still the first analysis of a new member presidency in its trio form and thus provides some relevant conclusions.³⁴ Specifically, it both corroborates and questions certain theoretical assumptions about the role of small state presidencies of the EU Council and the realisation of national interests and provides ideas for future research.

The key finding of our analysis is that it was easier to pursue national interests (although very modestly included in the presidency programme) during the presidency as opposed to the time of *normal* membership. It confirms the theoretical postulate that the presidency can make an imprint on negotiation processes. Two main factors explain this. First, Slovenia did not have specific national interests in a vast array of areas and, second, its interests largely coincided with those of other European actors, presenting Slovenia with hardly any opposition to fulfilling its goals. This mostly explains why the Slovenian public administration felt that the realisation of national interests was facilitated during the presidency.

The abovementioned factors also affected Slovenia's agenda-setting capacity. According to the self-evaluation of its public administration, Slovenia's agenda-setting appeared very sovereign and independent. This means the country was aware of the value of agenda-shaping in influencing the negotiation process and used the presidency's mechanisms in line with theoretical assumptions concerning small member state behaviour during the presidency.

34 Based on the initial research about the Slovenian EU Council Presidency, a series of similar surveys was conducted also in four other Member States when they took over the Presidency (**Sweden** (July – December 2009), **Belgium** (July – December 2010), **Hungary** (January – June 2011) and **Denmark** (January – June 2012)). The surveys were conducted in the same way in order to provide the possibility of cross-country comparison on different aspects of the EU Council Presidency. Our preliminary evaluation of the cross-country comparison has not showed substantial differences in the manner in which the countries realised their national interests. It was even more surprising that there were also no substantial differences between old and new Member States regarding many of the aspects covered by the survey (the aspects are more or less the same as showed in the tables of this article). So even though this article based its conclusions on a single case study, the preliminary results of the comparative study of five countries' presidencies actually reinforce the results and conclusions of this article, making the conclusions of this article somehow more universal.

Conversely, the same results revealed that, due to the lack of its own interests, Slovenia actually set the agenda mostly according to the trio and its own presidency programme. The analysis of the Slovenian Presidency programme demonstrated that all priorities, except for the Western Balkans, were part of the inherited agenda. The time to put more national interests on the agenda was when setting the presidency programme. Such pro-European orientation and honest-broker behaviour helped Slovenia gain the trust of other actors and resulted in the adoption of several dossiers that had long been open.³⁵ This means that Slovenia was not too proactive in trying to materialise them, but was firm enough to achieve visible progress. This seems to have made it more influential in certain priority areas than in others, which is clearly consistent with theorised small state presidency behaviour.

This modest list of Slovenia's priorities is a logical consequence of perhaps the major objective of the presidency, namely to perform well in the presidency and deny some pessimistic expectations that a small new member country would be unable to do so. Limited administrative capacities and lack of experience were also thought to be limiting factors in putting more national interests in the programme. Specialisation was sought to make better progress in its priority areas. Slovenia not only adjusted its entire presidency organisational structure to mitigate the constraints of its public administration, but it also intensified work on relevant dossiers, which was reflected in higher quality cooperation (Table 6).

Slovenia did not take full advantage of some other benefits of small states' administration since it encountered some structural difficulties that partially hindered the realisation of its national interests. For example, Slovenia did not communicate within its own public administration in the most effective way. The underdeveloped informal contacts were therefore also reflected in problems of vertical and horizontal cooperation as well as a stifling hierarchy, which in fact emerged as the most pertinent problem during the Slovenian Presidency. Therefore, many respondents thought these issues led to a definition of national interests that was interdepartmentally disunited, bad and, at times, even non-existent. Here, Slovenia probably missed an opportunity since more efficient working processes and better communication within its own public administration

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35 See footnote 30.

(up- and downstream) would have resulted in clearly defined national interests that would have been easier to defend.

In conclusion, Slovenia played according to many observers the role of a good presidency (Klemenčič 2007; Lenarčič 2007; Ster 2008). In most cases, it focused on reaching agreements rather than pursuing its own interests. It acted in accordance with the logic of appropriateness (see March and Olson 1998), the guiding principle of small state presidencies. Nevertheless, its realisation of national interests should be viewed far more critically. Namely, there were internal factors that prevented Slovenia from acting optimally. To improve the pursuit of its national interests, Slovenia would have had to raise the level of knowledge and skills within its public administration. Further, it could have gained more if its public administration had known how to benefit from the advantages of a small administration. It could have improved its vertical and horizontal cooperation that might have directly led to more coherent and clearly defined national interests (in both priority and non-priority areas), which would also have been easier to defend in practice. Improved networking skills and enhancing informal contacts could also have enhanced chances for the materialisation of national interests since these capabilities were assessed as rather poor. Nevertheless, the Presidency of the EU Council gave Slovenia greater international visibility and the results exceeded the modest expectations. From Slovenia's point of view, this represents the successful fulfilment of a highly important national interest.

In order to be able to generalise the results regarding the presidencies' realisation of national interests, future research should include a more diverse array of countries in terms of size and presidency experiences, more issues, and the subjective results of the survey(s) should be compared with objective data on the realisation of priority interests of presiding countries (for instance, voting behaviour, evaluation of decisions taken during the presidencies, etc.) applying more robust methodological tools.

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