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Reinvigorating the rotating presidency: Slovakia and agenda-setting in the EU’s external relations*

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ABSTRACT
What scope and autonomy are available to a small member state holding the EU Presidency as regards shaping the agenda and influencing decision-making in the EU’s external relations? This article focuses on the case of the Slovak Presidency (SK PRES) of the Council of Ministers of the EU in the second half of 2016. Building on organization theory-inspired institutionalist approaches to studying practices in organizations, it examines how Slovakia sought to shape the EU’s external affairs agenda. Haugevik and Rieker have called for analyses of the balance between autonomy and integration of small member states in the EU’s governance order. This article is intended as a contribution to that end.

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Introduction

With the implementation of the Lisbon Treaty, the scope and functions of the rotating Presidency of the Council of Ministers in EU foreign policy-making have become limited. The institutional setting includes new responsibilities for the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy in chairing the Foreign Affairs Council (FAC), as well as for the European External Action Service (EEAS) in chairing most of the Council working groups that prepare the FAC meetings. As Vanhoonacker and Pomorska (2013) note, the EEAS enjoys significant leeway in setting the agenda in these working groups. But what scope and autonomy are available to a small member state holding the EU Presidency as regards shaping the agenda and influencing decision-making in the EU’s external relations? This article focuses on the case of the Slovak Presidency (SK PRES) of the Council of Ministers of the EU in the second half of 2016. Building on organization theory-inspired institutionalist approaches to studying practices in organizations (March & Simon, 1958; March & Olsen, 1989, 2006), it examines how Slovakia sought to shape the EU’s external affairs agenda. Haugevik and Rieker (2017) have called for analyses of the balance between autonomy and integration of small member states in the EU’s governance order. This article is intended as a contribution to that end.

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© 2017 European International Studies Association
Institutional developments in the post-Lisbon era have concentrated external relations agenda-setting to EU-level agencies such as the EEAS and EU-level venues such as the Council Secretariat and the Political and Security Committee (PSC) (Dijkstra, 2012; Vanhoonacker & Pomorska, 2013). The role and functions of the rotating EU Council Presidency have now been significantly curbed in the field of external relations, with the HR and the EEAS taking the leading role and becoming the locus of institutional memory (Vanhoonacker & Pomorska, 2013). However, the current role and the degree of autonomy of the rotating presidency in external relations agenda-setting are relatively under studied. Does holding the rotating EU Council Presidency structure the agenda-setting behaviour of the respective member state – and if so, how? Does the member state holding the Presidency employ certain structural arrangements and procedures set up in the post-Lisbon constellation in shaping the EU’s external relations agenda? If so, how – and to what extent does it enjoy autonomy in setting the agenda?

This study focuses on the case of the Slovak Presidency in the second half of 2016. First, it examines the preparatory phase, and the socialization and training of Slovak officials in relation to the EU-level institutions, as this can shed light on the structural conditions for the conduct of the presidency and its autonomy. Second, it explores the practices of how Slovak Presidency sought to shape agenda in the EU’s external relations.

**Studying organizational practices of the Presidency in EU external relations agenda-setting**

Before moving on to the case study, two notes on the study of practices are in order. First, the scholarly literature in several social science disciplines has shown greater interest in practices in the past two decades. International relations, for instance, has experienced a “practice turn”, with scholars delving into anthropological and sociological approaches to the study of practices (Adler & Pouliot, 2011; Adler-Nissen, 2016; Neumann, 2002; Pouliot, 2008; for a recent appraisal, see Bicchi & Bremberg, 2016). Such a practice turn has arguably never occurred in organization theory, as the study of social and organizational practices has been a core focus of organization scholarship ever since its early days (see e.g. Michels, 1911; Selznick, 1949). Institutionalist approaches to the study of organizations have focused on the interplay between formal structures and informal practices as well as on the role of practices as carriers of organizational rules, norms and behavioural codes (March & Olsen, 1989, 2006). Informed by these insights, the primary focus in this article is on practices as micro-level patterns of action with varying degrees of flexibility within established institutional settings. The concept of “practices” as used here resembles the open and inclusive approach proposed by Bicchi and Bremberg (2016, p. 394), as “socially meaningful patterns of action”.

Second, as regards methodology, this analysis of Slovak governmental practices in the conduct of its rotating EU Presidency builds on the study of official documents and press releases, and on a series of in-depth interviews with top-level senior diplomats in the Slovak Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs (MFEA). These included the State Secretary of the MFEA and Plenipotentiary for the Slovak Presidency in the Council of the EU; the Slovak Permanent Representative to the EU; the Director General of EU Affairs Directorate General, MFEA; the Director of the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) Department and “EU Correspondent” of Slovak Presidency in the Council of
the EU; and the Director of the Diplomatic Preparation, Training and Library Department, MFEA. Such a qualitative approach was chosen to provide nuancing and detail on behavioural patterns and practices that remain largely informal and difficult to track in official documents and/or organizational charts of formal policy-making processes.

**Setting up links to the General Secretariat of the Council (GSC) as the Brussels-based interface of the Slovak Presidency**

In the preparatory period for the Presidency, the Slovak government introduced several entirely new training and socialization practices in cooperation with EU institutions. This included extensive involvement of experts from the General Secretariat of the Council (GSC) as lecturers in three modules targeting Slovak chairs and co-chairs, coordinators and other officials involved in the work of Slovak Presidency. Training modules were organized in Bratislava and at the Slovak permanent representation to the EU in Brussels in 2015, with the Slovak government covering travel and accommodation for speakers and participants, while the GSC lecturers provided their input free of charge. In all, 916 Slovak officials participated in these modules; this was the first time that the GSC had provided such extensive training.

Also, a first-of-its-kind internship programme was set up for Slovak officials to experience work in EU institutions and get to know the Brussels institutional landscape directly. The aim was to introduce Slovak officials to the institutional setting of the GSC to enable smooth cooperation during the presidency period. It was expected that the Slovak government would have to rely extensively on the GSC for administrative support and institutional memory in performing the tasks of the presidency, including the need to organize some 2000 meetings – approx. 1800 to be held in Brussels and 200 in Bratislava. As part of this internship programme, 3 groups of Slovak officials (some 120 officials all together), were sent on 2-week stays to Brussels. Based at the Slovak permanent representation to the EU, they familiarized themselves with the working environment, visited the GSC and other EU institutions, and attended lectures organized especially for them by the GSC staff. These innovative training practices provided a useful interface for learning the practices and understanding the mechanisms of EU-level governance, and supported day-to-day coordination with the GSC during the presidency period. As several Slovak officials explained in interviews, one reason for opting for such close coordination with the GSC as was that the GSC was seen as a neutral administrative support apparatus. Administrative integration of presidency functions with such a neutral actor in Brussels was seen as supporting the ability of Slovak Presidency to play the role of an honest broker – a capability particularly important at a time when the European Commission appeared to be assuming an increasingly political role and was no longer seen as a neutral bureaucratic apparatus supporting EU decision-making and as guardian of the EU treaties. Arguably, this was also a structural condition for carving out a greater degree of autonomy for the Slovak government in performing the presidency functions. Representatives from the then-upcoming small-state presidencies, including the government of Estonia, have shown a keen interest in the innovative Slovak practice of joint Brussels-based training of officials in cooperation with the GSC, and have been considering introducing similar procedures. Indeed, this might contribute to the formation of what Trondal and Bauer (2017) refer to as “the
EU’s multi-level administrative order” (see also Egeberg, Trondal, & Vestlund, 2015). This is useful, as the literature on EU agencification has focused largely on the formation of such order in the realm of supranational governance and cooperation between the European Commission and executive agencies in the member states. As several interviewees suggested, Slovak officials who participated in the training and later in running the Slovak Presidency coordination have become acquainted with a new kind of operation modus where their daily working routines were to an extent integrated with those of the GSC. Further and more thorough research would be needed to expand on these insights. In particular, follow-up studies should explore whether such learning processes led to more profound socialization of Slovak officials into a new type of an EU-oriented logic of appropriateness supporting daily operations of the Slovak government in the post-Presidency period. But even based on the preliminary evidence presented here it seems clear that the role of the Council (and the GSC in particular) in the learning processes in member-state public administrations has been an overlooked aspect in research on the formation of the EU’s administrative order.

What, then, are the practices of how Slovak Presidency sought to shape the agenda in the EU’s external relations?

**Slovak Presidency practices of agenda-setting**

Slovak Presidency in the Council of the EU operated in a post-Lisbon institutional landscape, with many functions previously held by the rotating presidency now taken over by EU-level institutions. However, there were several practices through which Slovak Presidency sought to influence agenda in the EU’s external relations. These included indirect promotion of key national interests, chairing working parties in the Council, working the cabinets, and not least organizing the “Bratislava summit” – an informal meeting of the EU27 heads of state (minus the UK) in September 2016. In these areas, Slovak Presidency took on various agenda-setting roles including that of a gatekeeper, agenda shaper and policy entrepreneur (see Kingdon, 1984). A gatekeeper role implies the ability of a Presidency to include and exclude issues from negotiations. This can happen by, for instance, administrative action or inaction on particular policy proposals. In conceptual terms, a gatekeeper role combines Tallberg’s (2003) concept of agenda structuring and agenda exclusion. An agenda-shaper role denotes efforts of the Presidency in developing, moulding and changing proposals put forward by the European Commission and by the member states into the negotiating process. This is about providing input into drafts of documents, for instance. Finally, a policy-entrepreneur role entails the ability of a Presidency to promote and gain support for particular kinds of comprehensive policy initiatives, declarations and actions that suit the interests of the Presidency (see also Bunse, 2009). Conceptually, this notion is close to Tallberg’s (2003) concept of “agenda-setting” understood as introduction of new issues on the policy agenda. Also, it corresponds with Bunse’s (2009, p. 40) understanding of Presidency entrepreneurship as initiation of policies, mediation and brokering deals in support of these policies. Arguably, the three roles are different and require different kinds of practices in governments performing them (Kingdon, 1984).

Building on this, we now turn to agenda-setting roles and practices of Slovak Presidency in the area of the EU’s external relations.
Indirect promotion of key national interests

It is an established practice in the EU that governments holding the Council Presidency should take care not to promote specific national interests, and rather act as honest brokers and coordinators of joint positions (Bunse, 2009; Dinan, 1999; Hayes-Renshaw & Wallace, 1997; Princen, 2007; Tallberg, 2003, 2006; Westlake, 1999). While Slovak Presidency was explicit about maintaining this norm, we can note several indirect ways whereby Slovakia’s national interests were promoted. 

First, Slovakia has been critical to the planned Nordstream II pipeline. To avoid having to discuss this agenda at Council meetings and/or having to voice strong criticism of the possible actions of fellow member-state governments seeking to promote Nordstream II during Slovak Presidency, the Slovak government opted for two strategies. The first was a 7 March 2016 letter to the President of the European Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker, drafted and coordinated by the Slovak government and signed by the prime ministers of the three Baltic states, Croatia, Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Romania and Slovakia, with copies to other leading EU representatives, such as President of the Council Tusk and Energy Commissioner Šefčovič. The letter took up key points in the Slovak position on Nordstream II, including concerns that the project would negatively affect the use of existing gas transit infrastructure in Ukraine and other countries (Slovakia among them); would undermine geopolitical stability and energy security in Eastern Europe and the EU as a whole; and would increase dependence on the existing gas transit route in the same area (Nordstream), thereby breaking with EU legislation regulating the gas market and the emerging Energy Union. The concerns raised in the letter were echoed in a speech on Nordstream II given by Energy Commissioner Šefčovič to the European Parliament in April 2016. Commissioner Šefčovič had also effectively pitted the Nordstream II project against the plans to establish the Energy Union, making it into an issue of high political salience. As interviewees in the Slovak MFEA noted, the Slovak government has been in active communication with Commissioner Šefčovič on these issues and there was some coordination. In the context of the upcoming Slovak Presidency, the letter pointed out the topics and lines that Slovakia would see as a reason for vetoing and/or refusing to put proposals on the agenda in Council negotiations. As the contents of the letter were communicated to fellow governments in other EU capitals as well, the Slovak government also made clear its national interests regarding Nordstream II before assuming the presidency. This, in turn, ensured that fellow member-state governments and key EU institutions were aware of which points they should avoid taking up in negotiations during Slovak Presidency. Also, in Council meetings (e.g. GAC), the Slovak representatives coordinated closely with officials in the Czech and Polish governments regarding Nordstream II; if propositions regarding this were to be tabled, they could include the Slovak positions in their statements in negotiations. Hence, the Slovak government promoted key national interests in an indirect way, by employing a signalling tactic of a priori disagreement with an issue (the 7 March 2016 letter) and by tactically allying with governments that held similar views on the Nordstream II issue in Council negotiations. In this way, the Slovak government effectively managed to keep issues of major national interest from getting on the agenda in the first place. This gatekeeping role is a familiar tactic in agenda-setting – and indeed a key instrument for achieving influence in complex decision-making situations in organizations in general (Cohen, March, &
Olsen, 1972) and in the EU (Peters, 2001; Richardson, 2001; Tallberg, 2003). Also, the Slovak strategy in pursuing own interests indirectly by keeping particular issues off the Council agenda for the duration of the Presidency supports earlier findings to the same effect by Panke (2010a, 2010b).

**Chairing FAC working parties in the Council**

Following the implementation of the Lisbon Treaty, most of the 31 preparatory bodies (working parties) that prepare the meetings of FAC are now permanently chaired by the EEAS. This provides for continuity and a repository of institutional memory. On the other hand, the rotating Council Presidency chairs some of the working parties. Slovakia chaired four working parties in the FAC realm: the RELEX Working Party (legal, financial and institutional issues in CFSP); the Working Party on Development Cooperation (CODEV); the Working Party on Enlargement and Countries Negotiating Accession to the EU (COELA); and the Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) Working Party. Chairing these groups – in particular the combination of the first three, RELEX, CODEV and COELA – proved useful in working to promote one of the key interests and priorities of Slovak Presidency: further EU enlargement. This issue had become contentious, with some member states (like Germany) opposed to further enlargement at this stage. Slovak Presidency could work in close coordination with the EU Commission and the EEAS in making progress with the enlargement agenda. A key role here was played by the RELEX Working Party, where overall financial frameworks and support for enlargement processes were prepared and pre-negotiated. Chairing this working party provided important oversight and leverage in effectively moving forward on the enlargement agenda. This included the opening up of two new chapters in the accession negotiations with Serbia – one covering the judiciary and fundamental rights; the other one, justice, freedom and security (Chapters 23 and 24) – already in July 2016.

Steps were also taken regarding relations with Bosnia and Herzegovina: Slovakia managed to get a formulation included in the conclusions of the General Affairs Council on 20 September 2016 where the Council requests the Commission to assess Bosnia and Herzegovina’s application for EU membership. Getting this sentence into the final text of the GAC conclusions was no easy task, as it would formally trigger the process of accession of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and the German government – sceptical to speedy enlargement – was originally against including it. In both of these cases, Slovak Presidency took on agenda-shaping- and policy entrepreneur role.

**Convening Accession Conferences**

A new element following the implementation of the Lisbon Treaty is the possibility to convene EU-level Accession and Cooperation Conferences with countries in the EU’s neighbourhood.

In the months prior to Slovak Presidency, HR Mogherini offered Slovakia to act as convenor of some of the upcoming Accession Conferences. Slovak Foreign Minister Lajčák took on the role as convenor of the third meeting of the Association Conference with Serbia held in Brussels on 18 July 2016. The timetable for that meeting had been set well in advance, and its date during Slovak Presidency was a matter of temporal
coincidence. However, it offered Slovakia the opportunity to promote one of its key presidency priorities and one of its long-term foreign policy goals: EU enlargement and stabilization of the countries of Western Balkans. The meeting resulted in opening two chapters in the EU accession negotiations with Serbia – Chapters 23 and 24, as noted above. As senior Slovak diplomats pointed out in interviews, this opening of the two chapters was by no means automatic. Slovakia could build on results achieved by the Presidency Trio constituted by The Netherlands, Slovakia and Malta. The Slovak government had not only coordinated its training and policy activities with the Dutch government in the run-up to the Slovak Presidency. It had also actively continued to work on agenda that the Dutch Presidency started on. One of these was an attempt by the Dutch government to open up Chapters 23 and 24 in negotiations with Serbia in the first semester of 2016 but the government of Croatia had blocked the process by raising concerns about specific aspects. In the run-up to the July 2016 Association Conference, the Slovak diplomatic service managed to accommodate the Croatian concerns through a process entailing several personal phone calls between the Slovak foreign minister and his Croatian counterpart during the weekend prior to the opening of the Conference. Perhaps most importantly, the Slovak foreign ministry allowed the Croatian foreign ministry to draft the text of the opening statement of Slovak Presidency at the Conference. That apparently helped to ease concerns, and Croatia agreed to the opening of the two new negotiation chapters with Serbia. This confirms earlier findings by Thorhallsson (2015) that informality and flexibility are among the features that enable small states’ administrations to operate effectively in EU negotiations. Yet, while Slovak Presidency did take on a policy entrepreneur role in the above-mentioned context of negotiations with Serbia, it needs to be noted that the degree of the autonomy of a rotating Presidency clearly is constrained by on-going negotiations commenced under previous presidencies.

Working with the cabinets of key EU institutions

An established practice is that the rotating presidency has privileged access to the cabinets of key EU institutions, including those of European Commission President Juncker, European Council President Tusk, Commission Vice-President and HR Mogherini as well as European Parliament President Schultz. As earlier analyses show, small states can compensate for their relative small breadth and depth of networks in EU policy-making by nurturing contacts to the European Commission and other key EU institutions (Bunse, 2009; Panke, 2010a, 2010b). The capacity of small states to develop such relations is strengthened in the period of their Presidency. Relations with the cabinets of key EU institutions are not a one-way street as EU institutions sometimes seek the support of the rotating presidency in moving specific policy proposals forward by getting them on the agenda in Council negotiations. One example is the European Fund for Sustainable Development, proposed by the Commission as part of a package of reforms included in the European External Investment Plan introduced in mid-September 2016. To get this issue on the agenda of Council negotiations, the Juncker Cabinet had actively pursued contacts with the Slovak permanent representation to the EU. This was a situation in which the rotating presidency was in a position to speed up or postpone an issue item from getting on the agenda in the Council negotiations. As this is an instrument needed to stop the sources of migration to the EU from the South and the East – and thereby in line with
the Slovak Presidency priorities – the Slovak permanent representation (having consulted with the government in Bratislava) made an agreement with the Juncker Cabinet that this issue would get on the Council agenda before the end of 2016. By contrast, in several other cases where cabinets of various Commissioners exerted pressure in the form of meetings or phone calls aimed at getting certain policy proposals on the Council agenda, the Slovak permanent representation was less active, effectively bracketing issues from getting on the agenda. Again, a gatekeeping role of Slovak Presidency could be recorded.

**Convening an informal heads of government summit in Bratislava**

Summits and informal meetings of EU heads of governments are usually held in Brussels, and may take up various topical issues. Such a summit was convened, for instance, in November 2015 by European Council President Tusk to address issues of the migration crisis. It is rather usual for such summits to be held outside Brussels. In the preparatory period for Slovak Presidency, the Slovak Prime Minister Fico informally raised the idea of holding an informal summit meeting in Bratislava, speaking with Chancellor Merkel in Berlin on 16 June 2016 as well as in conversations with other EU leaders. Originally, this idea did not receive much support. Then, with the result of the Brexit referendum on 24 June 2016, the situation changed substantially. Already on 29 June, Slovak Prime Minister Fico could announce, at a heads-of-government summit in Brussels, that he had support from Chancellor Merkel, President Hollande and also European Council President Tusk to convene an informal meeting of the heads of government, under the auspices of Slovak Presidency, to be held in Bratislava, on 16 September that year.

In terms of diplomatic practices, that meeting maintained a degree of informality, as it included a boat-trip down the Danube from the centre of Bratislava to an art gallery and back. This idea, proposed by the Slovak prime minister, was at first opposed by the Cabinet of European Council President Tusk (acting as the main convenor of the summit), who cited lack of time for such an excursion. However, the Slovak government won through: in addition to the official and quite formal negotiations in the Bratislava castle, the 27 heads of state continued to negotiate also during their trip on the boat. As noted by several senior diplomats who participated, the atmosphere was informal and may have helped in achieving several important breakthroughs in the summit negotiations. First, the EU heads of state agreed to ratify the Paris Agreement on climate change. The prime ministers of Italy and Poland had reservations, but they managed to reach agreement on joint steps forward. As a result, the Paris Agreement was then ratified by the EU on 5 October and entered into force on 4 November 2016. Such swift action towards ratification was also an important pre-condition for the EU to have an efficient joint approach at the Marrakech Climate Change Conference 7–18 November that year.

Second, the EU heads of state agreed to a set of new practices in organizing the monthly GAC meetings in Brussels. This pertained primarily to the timing of meetings: the practice had been to start such meetings at 4pm Brussels time, often ending many hours later, forcing prime ministers to hold press conferences at, say, 1 or 2am. The heads of governments recognized that this practice was tiring and resulted in suboptimal performances at the negotiation table and in the media. Hence, it was agreed that GAC meetings should
start at 12.30pm, so that the daily activities, including press conferences, might end before midnight. Formally, these new practices were agreed at the GAC in December 2016.

Third, the leaders also agreed to issue a joint Bratislava Declaration and Roadmap. Apparently, adoption of such a document was by no means a given. One hour before the end of the official proceedings of the Summit on 16 September 2016, there was still no agreement that a joint Declaration should be signed by the EU leaders. The Cabinet of the Council President Tusk had agreed that the text of the Declaration should not be technical, and could therefore be drafted by the Slovak permanent representation to the EU in Brussels. Moreover, the Declaration – which came to be referred to as the framework of a forthcoming “Bratislava process” of EU reforms – contained formulations that opened the way for several potentially wide-ranging reforms in the EU, like the stipulation that the December 2016 European Council was “to decide on a concrete implementation plan on security and defence and on how to make better use of the options in the Treaties, especially as regards capabilities” (Bratislava Declaration, p. 5). The options included Article 42 of the Lisbon Treaty opening up for permanent structured cooperation in defence between groups of member states within the EU framework (see especially Lisbon Treaty Art. 42, pts. 5 and 6). The December 2016 Council agreed on various lines of action in this area; and a set of specific proposals, including Permanent Structured Cooperation in security and defence, was agreed by the Council on 6 March 2017. Also, the results of the Bratislava summit were commented on by the European Commission President Juncker as an example of how the EU managed to preserve its unity of action “around our common ground”. In sum, Bratislava summit enabled Slovak Presidency to take on the roles as agenda shaper and policy entrepreneur.

Conclusions

Earlier analyses of the role of the rotating presidency in external relations agenda-setting have found that this role has been constrained by the legal and procedural framework of the Lisbon Treaty, which concentrates agenda-setting in EU institutions, including the EEAS and the Council (see e.g. Dijkstra, 2012; Vanhoonacker & Pomorska, 2013). However, this article has argued that these findings need to be complemented by analyses of the autonomy of the rotating presidency, focusing on the day-to-day practices of running the presidency agenda. The case of the Slovak Presidency of the Council of Ministers in the second half of 2016 has provided several findings.

First, as regards training of officials, Slovak Presidency introduced several innovative and unprecedented practices of cooperation with the GSC. Slovak Presidency set up practical mechanisms of integrating the work performed by Slovak governmental officials and the GSC administration. Such reliance on the established institutional memory and procedural know-how of the GSC helped Slovak Presidency to tackle practical and procedural challenges related to the performance of presidency tasks, and to expand the scope of its autonomy vis-à-vis EU-institutions such as the Commission and large member states. An interesting aspect for further research would be to explore more generally whether small size of member-state administrations might correlate with greater readiness to tap into the institutional resources of the GSC, in turn fostering greater procedural efficiency in the performance of presidency tasks. Moreover, Slovakia’s approach to coordinating its presidency administration with the GSC may indicate that the formation of the EU’s
“multi-level administrative order” (see Trondal & Bauer, 2017) happens not only in the realm of the European Commission cooperating with national agencies but possibly also on the level of the GSC in relation to rotating presidencies. This appears to be a new mode of standardization across levels of governance in the EU. Further research should investigate how pervasive and lasting these learning processes are and whether they eventually lead to new patterns of socialization in member states’ governments.

This study has also identified several kinds of practices used by Slovakia to achieve leverage in setting the agenda in EU foreign policy. First, there was indirect promotion of key national interests, as shown by the coordination of the letter of nine prime ministers opposed to Nordstream II and its delivery to the President of the Commission a few months prior to the start of the Slovak Presidency. This approach enabled Slovakia to adhere to the established norm whereby the rotating presidency should not openly promote its national interests during its tenure – and still influence the agenda, as this issue could effectively be blocked from gaining support. Here, Slovak Presidency took on a gatekeeper role. Second, the Slovak government sought to shape the agenda on the level of working parties in the Council as well as by working the cabinets of key EU-level institutions. Finally, due to the largely unexpected result of the Brexit referendum, Slovakia got wide EU support for its plans to host an EU heads of government meeting in Bratislava in September 2016. That meeting achieved important progress in several areas, including ratification of the Paris Agreement on climate change; procedural changes in the timing of GAC meetings in Brussels; and not least issuing the Bratislava Declaration and Roadmap outlining further steps in reforming the EU. Here Slovak Presidency took on the role as policy entrepreneur. Based on these findings, three more general observations can be made here.

First, the three roles of the presidency as gatekeeper, agenda shaper and policy entrepreneur performed by Slovak Presidency are not country-specific. As previous research shows, small member states take on such roles when running the Presidency (Bunse, 2009; Panke, 2010a, 2010b; Tallberg, 2003, 2006). Yet, the Slovak case indicates that even after the implementation of the Lisbon Treaty changes strengthening the coordinating role of the EEAS and other EU-level institutions such as the PSC in the field of EU’s external relations, the rotating Presidency continues to enjoy considerable leeway in performing various agenda-setting roles. These aspects merit further comparative analyses of other countries’ presidencies.

Second, for small states in particular, the rotating presidency period provides opportunities for setting the EU’s external relations agenda to an extent and in ways which they normally do not enjoy. A strategic implication is that small states in the EU may wish to build coalitions with other small states in periods prior to and after their Presidency and thereby gain greater leverage on issues that constitute their vital foreign policy agenda. A practical implication for organization of diplomatic apparatuses of both small and large states is the need to strengthen diplomatic presence and relations with countries holding the Presidency. Most EU member states have been doing this by increasing the number of staff posted to the capital holding the Presidency resulting in what may be termed rotating intra-EU bilateralism. For small states’ diplomatic services this constitutes an important instrument in focusing their limited diplomatic resources. These aspects related to small states should be studied more thoroughly as it has not been covered in the literature on intra-EU bilateralism so far (see Bátorá & Hocking, 2009; Uilenreef, 2013).
Third, the practice introduced by the Slovak Presidency of close cooperation with the GSC in the daily conduct of the Presidency coordination functions – a practice reportedly also used by the Maltese and Estonian Presidencies in 2017 – merits closer examination. The findings of the current analysis suggest that effectiveness of small states’ performance of presidency agenda-setting roles may be strengthened by tapping into resources of the GSC be that the institutional memory, personnel capacities or procedural expertise. By strengthening the agenda-setting roles of small member states, their autonomy might also be strengthened via the linkage with the GSC. Hence, the administrative linkage between rotating Presidencies and the GSC should be studied in further comparative analyses. Also, potential socialization effects of the collaborative partnerships between member states’ administrations and the GSC require further scholarly attention.

In sum, the case of Slovak Presidency in the second half of 2016 indicates that the rotating presidency as an institution in the system of EU governance remains relatively robust. It provides opportunities for small member states to wield influence on agenda-setting in EU policymaking including in the field of the EU’s external relations. The current findings from the Slovak case invite further studies that could test their validity in a comparative perspective.

Notes

1. Interview I1 (20 July 2016); interview I5 (29 October 2016).
2. Interview I1 (20 July 2016); interview I2 (1 August 2016); interview I4 (21 September 2016; interview I5, 29 October 2016).
3. This was an observation noted in particular in interview I5 (29 October 2016).
4. Interview I1 (22 July 2016).
5. Interview I1 (20 July 2016); interview I5 (29 October 2016).
6. For the notion of “logic of appropriateness” see March and Olsen (1989).
10. Interview I2 (1 August 2016); interview I3 (22 August 2016).
11. Interview I3 (22 August 2016).
12. Interview I2 (1 August 2016).
13. The division of labour in having the Slovak Presidency chair these four working parties was agreed between the EEAS and the Slovak Presidency prior to the Presidency period 2016. The choice of the particular working parties also related to specific expertise that Slovak Presidency possessed.
14. Interview I2 (1 August 2016).
18. Interview I4 (21 September 2016); interview I5 (29 October 2016).

22. Interview I5 (29 October 2016).

23. Interview I5 (29 October 2016).

24. Interview I2 (1 August 2016); interview I3, (22 August 2016); interview I5 (29 October 2016).

25. Interview I2 (1 August 2016); interview I3 (22 August 2016).

26. Interview I4 (21 September 2016); interview I5 (29 October 2016).


29. This was reported by the Slovak Prime Minister Fico in a response during the Q&A session following his speech at the 17th Annual Review Conference on the Slovak Foreign and European Policy, Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs, Bratislava, 16 March 2017.

30. Interview I5 (29 October 2016).


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