

THE PRESIDENCY AS JUGGLER

Managing Conflicting Expectations*

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1. Introduction

Every six months the office of the presidency changes from one member state to another. This means that there are always three or four countries gearing themselves up for this prestigious position. The EU presidency² is, however, a nebulous function so that this preparation has to be done carefully and has to be based on a profound understanding of the roles of the presidency. As will appear below, the presidency imposes conflicting demands on member states. They should therefore possess capacities to combine different – and conflicting – perspectives and to continuously monitor negotiations and outcomes. In more specific terms, the presidency has to be able to combine sector-specific concerns with neutrality and with the need to provide leadership, without one or the other being subordinate *a priori*. It can therefore be compared to a juggler with three balls (sets of tasks) up in the air. The kinds of management challenges this imposes are consequently more stringent than those faced when European affairs have to be coordinated under ‘normal’ circumstances. We can even go one step further: the office of the presidency not only requires more attention to coordination, but also imposes different kinds of coordination objectives, and thus demands different kinds of coordination mechanisms. While at the helm, the member state should no longer develop optimal negotiating positions from a national or sectoral point of view. When not in the chair, the formulation of the national brief for the negotiators can usually be left to the individual ministries. However, the presidency has to take different objectives into account. These different objectives demand different coordination systems – instead of merely extrapolating existing systems.

This paper discusses the roles of the presidency and what these roles mean in terms of capacities for managing EU affairs at national level. The arguments expounded here are, first of all, that preparation for presidency requires, in addition to the training seminars which member states already organize, an analysis of the capacities of administrations to combine substantive interests with generalist perspectives (defended by, for instance, Foreign Affairs ministries).³ By focusing on the conflicting tasks of the presidency, and the management implications this has, attention is directed at aspects that usually remain on the sidelines of the debate on the position of the presidency (as well as on

the reform of this institution).⁴ The conflicting tasks impose specific and different coordination needs. If the coordination mechanisms are well designed they will upgrade the performance of member states as well as support the European integration process. Secondly, it will be argued that the presidency is under-researched. The three characteristics of the presidency and the implications these have for its management offer two interrelated sets of research fields.

Section 2 sketches the specific position the chair has acquired during the European integration process and discusses the inherent conflict between neutrality, leadership and self-interests. Knowing the tasks of the presidency, the subsequent section can raise questions concerning the elements that determine effectiveness. The conflicting expectations, however, impose a need to look specifically at the management implications (Section 4). This section also makes a few remarks on the discussion about changing the presidency. Section 5 draws some conclusions and elaborates two interrelated lines of research.

2. Evolution and tasks of the presidency: why is the presidency important?

In order to discuss the management challenges of the presidency it is necessary to first present the evolution of the presidency’s functions and its importance. The current lack of understanding as to why the presidency is important, and how important it is, indicates its nebulous nature. Clarity regarding its functions is needed before discussing the management issues. The complex tasks of the presidency should have implications for the way in which officials/politicians discharge their role and for the way in which countries prepare themselves. Misconceptions of tasks have led to painful mistakes and have had an adverse effect on the performance of presidencies. For example, member states have, on the one hand, had high expectations of their influence as presidency and have used the six months to launch major initiatives, to steer integration in specific (nationally preferred) directions, to provide leadership, or, as one official remarked, ‘to put things right in Europe’.⁵ On the other hand, there have been those who emphasize the limits as to what a country can achieve due to, for example, the limited room for manoeuvre between the Council, EP and Commission. Over-estimation and underestimation of the tasks of the presidency may both be equally harmful. Another sign of the lack of understanding of the presidency is the fact

* Un bref résumé de cet article en français figure à la fin.

that even a British quality newspaper noted that Blair now presides over the 20 Commissioners, and presented presidency events as 'European Commission events'.⁶

Before dealing with the organizational implications of the presidency, it is therefore useful to start with a discussion of its roles and tasks.

a. Evolution of the presidency

The functions of the presidency can only be understood in a historical context. Unlike the Commission or the European Parliament, the position of the presidency has not been designed. Instead, its position has developed in response to new developments in the integration process and to changes in inter-institutional relations. The momentous increase in importance becomes clear when one compares the tasks involved in the description of the position of the presidency in the Treaties. The founding treaties, originating from the early 1950s, only remark that the office of the presidency shall be held in turn by member states (Article 146) and that it shall convene meetings (Article 147).

The limited space devoted to the presidency signifies the federal origin of the European Union. The initial design of the EU's forerunner – the ECSC – had not even foreseen a Council, and consequently no presidency. The ECSC consisted of a High Authority which could take decisions (now called the Commission), and which was controlled by an *Assemblée* (the EP). A Council was added at the insistence of, paradoxically, especially the Netherlands. In the original design the role of the Council was limited to that of a kind of Upper Chamber.

The role of the Council, and therefore that of the presidency, has gradually increased. Trends and events which have contributed to this development include: the sharpening differences between the member states on the relation between intergovernmentalism and supranationalism, a need to search for new targets in the integration process after the successes of the early 1960s, the weakening of the Commission, the increased workload, the successive enlargements, the reliance on summits for coordination of policies and for political initiatives, and the increased role of the EP.⁷

The main implications of this have been that the burden on the presidency has grown in terms of organizational workload and of chairing meetings. Not only are more meetings organized now than in the 1960s, the diversity between member states has also become more pronounced.⁸ Hence, the role of honest broker – within the Council as well as between Council, Commission and EP – has become more important compared with the initial situation, which was characterized by relatively clear objectives. In addition, especially due to the weakening of the Commission, a leadership gap has been created in the integration process. Debates on (limiting) the role of the Commission and the reinforcement of intergovernmentalism gradually eroded its position.⁹ Summits and the increased reliance on presidency compromises are just a few signs of the increased political function of the presidency. The

meetings of Heads of State and Governments were organized to take political initiatives, to support decision-making in the technical Councils and to coordinate overlap between the various compositions of the meetings of Ministers. These summits are quite labour-intensive for the host.

As a result of these developments, there is a heavier burden on the shoulders of the presidency. It is therefore possible to conclude that this function has grown by default rather than by design.¹⁰

This brief review of the evolution shows the conflicting demands imposed on member states holding the presidency. On the one hand, these trends have limited the influence of the presidency. Sensitive relations between member states, combined with the (even unwritten) rule of consensus, have demanded an honest broker role from the chair. Moreover, the interinstitutional interdependence demands that the presidency carefully handles the relations between the Council, Commission and EP. On the other hand, also the political role has become more important due to, among other things, the leadership gap created by the weakening of the Commission.¹¹ It is therefore possible to argue that the presidency's role is very restricted and that it has important steering and guiding functions. So, the confusion seems complete,¹² and, as a result, it is always easy to criticize the presidency for being too active or too passive (i.e. for emphasizing the leadership or the broker role).

b. Tasks

The difficulty in determining whether the presidency is a political function or whether it should be neutral is also apparent in the list of its tasks. The following functions are generally mentioned: management and administration of Council business, agenda-setting, mediation, initiation, representation, and organization of summits.¹³ These functions point to both the neutral administrative and mediation tasks as well as to the political agenda-setting and initiation functions.

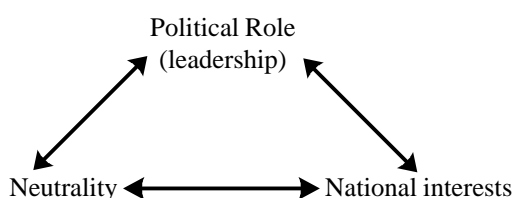
In addition to these 'neutrality' and 'leadership'¹⁴ tasks, the presidency has one additional role and that is the responsibility to defend national interests. This task has hardly received any attention, but is nevertheless omnipresent and can at times make the work of the chair very complicated. The fact that a member state at the helm also has national interests and that these affect its agenda and behaviour is often pushed aside. The argument for this being that the chair has to be neutral and that the expression of national objectives reduces its credibility as honest broker. Ludlow (1995, p.38) therefore emphasizes that the presidency is, first and foremost, an office of the Union and not an instrument to pursue national interests. The country in office should find the solution instead of being part of the problem. As a consequence, member states have made major sacrifices while occupying in the chair and have had to abandon national priorities.¹⁵

However, national interests cannot always be brushed

aside. It may even be dangerous with a view to national legitimacy of EU policies and national acceptance of the presidency role. Moreover, letting presidency concerns predominate *a priori* may lead to implementation problems later.¹⁶ Furthermore, national interests can find a legitimate and acceptable position on the presidency agenda and may lead to new initiatives or debates within the EU. Examples of this include the attention devoted to the Mediterranean and Northern dimensions of the EU by Spain and Finland, and the functioning of the internal market by the UK.¹⁷

The tasks and the pulls exerted on the presidency are summarized in Figure 1. The member state at the helm somehow has to combine three types of tasks and expectations: being the neutral broker (i.e. mediation and representation tasks), providing leadership (e.g. agenda-setting, developing strategic perspectives), and representing national interests (given the fact that the presidency is a political function).

Figure 1: Task environment of the presidency



The three sets of expectations are of course conflicting. The following questions therefore have to be raised. Where should a member state position itself within this triangle? Should it opt for one set of tasks or the other, or should it find a place somewhere in the middle?

An informed guess would be that most attention has been given to the administrative tasks – at least in the presidency literature and in official statements by member states.¹⁸ The position of the Council Secretariat is also clear in this respect. According to the Presidency Handbook: ‘The presidency must, by definition, be **neutral and impartial**’.¹⁹ Of course chairing meetings and finding solutions among 15 member states, the Commission and EP demands an honest broker role.²⁰ Partiality destroys the credibility required for the mediation role, and a long and controversial national agenda will make constructive cooperation from the other member states less likely. Hence, the emphasis of Foreign Affairs ministries on neutrality.

However, neutrality may be rather impractical given that the presidency is a political function. The EU is not chaired, as NATO is, by a Secretary-General. This rotating political function provides member states with the chance to influence the European agenda and to take the initiatives they deem opportune. This is one way of strengthening the legitimacy of the European integration process. Every member state has seized this opportunity.

Moreover, neutrality may lead to an uninteresting presidency and look bureaucratic to the public. It may also be unpopular with the press – which may want to see an attractive agenda and needs to have something to write about.²¹ Neutrality is therefore perhaps not only a myth, but also undesirable.

The belief in neutrality also leads to the paradox that ambitious ministries can sometimes be very successful in achieving results and in maintaining good cooperation between the member states around the table.²² It is therefore questionable whether high ambitions necessarily have a negative impact on outcome.

The political leadership role of the presidency has received considerably less attention. Nevertheless, it is possible to argue in favour of reinforcing the political tasks.²³ Albeit not in the context of a discussion on the presidency De Schoutheete, the former Belgian Permanent Representative, argues for more vision and political leadership in the European integration process. His argument is that there is a tendency to focus on problems and issues in a fragmented way, and that the problems are mainly tackled from a national perspective. However, the major current issues for which solutions have to be found demand longer-term strategic thinking from a European perspective (e.g. EMU, enlargement, connection between the internal market and social policy, security policy).²⁴ It is easy to argue in this light that, due to the relatively downbeat role of the Commission, a strong political leadership role within the Council is needed to unblock decisions and to provide the required vision.²⁵

Even less attention has been given to the extent to which national interests are allowed to interfere. Looking at the emphasis some Foreign Affairs ministries and the Council Secretariat have placed on neutrality, it even seems that this subject has become taboo.

The traditional emphasis on the administrative tasks indicates the choice of one of the aspects of the presidency (i.e. ‘taking care of business’). As a corollary, one can argue that the European integration process has developed a leadership gap: the Commission is no longer the powerful motor behind the integration process and differences between member states have increased due to the growing heterogeneity within the Council. Nevertheless, member states have used the presidency to provide leadership and used the period at the helm to lobby for national interests, although this fact is not stressed in official statements. This has often been done in imprudent and provocative ways. The need to combine neutrality with working towards the development of longer-term visions on European integration has not always been sufficiently acknowledged. Political leadership and the defence of national interests have therefore resulted in negative experiences and are now regarded with suspicion. However, the fact that mistakes have been made may not lead to the conclusion that presidencies should only be neutral. Better understanding of the position of the presidency, and of the challenges of managing conflicting expectations, may prevent

member states from resorting to the easy way out (i.e. the neutral presidency).

The emphasis on neutrality has reinforced low-key presidencies. Nevertheless, it can be argued that given the current topics on the agenda (such as enlargement, budget negotiations, 'Amsterdam II', and ensuring a stable Euro) and the lack of political leadership, the European integration process demands a reinforcement of the presidency.

3. Elements of success

The question concerning the tasks leads to the question of what kinds of capacities are needed to ensure successful presidencies. To find an answer it is necessary to first look at what determines success. This seems to be a simple and straightforward issue. Frequent references can be found to such elements as mediation skills, technical expertise, networks, luck, careful preparation, good people, and neutrality. It is surprising that little in-depth attention has been devoted in the literature, or in the world of practitioners, to the management of the presidency. Despite the ease with which elements of success are presented, a number of questions remain open as to whether these characteristics ensure an effective presidency.

First of all, there is the question of whether neutrality should be such an overriding priority – as already discussed above. Secondly, the question has to be addressed: what makes a successful presidency? Despite the fact that after each presidency evaluations appear in the literature and in national parliaments, a satisfactory answer has not yet been given.²⁶ One of the reasons put forward as to why it is so hard to evaluate presidencies is the fact that the outcome depends on 19 Councils and one or two summits. It is therefore argued that it is hard to make general statements regarding success or failure. It also makes a difference who is doing the evaluation (e.g. MEPs or interest groups with conflicting demands). Furthermore, evaluations are complicated by the fact that presidencies depend on rolling agendas and only have six months at their disposal and a range of different tasks to perform. Given these difficulties in defining and measuring success, it is not surprising to find that various ministries during the Dutch presidency used different definitions of success, ranging from low-key objectives of 'continuity' and 'neutrality' to the more ambitious 'output based on results' while others might want to judge the outcome against the impetus that has been given to the integration process (i.e. the leadership role discussed above).

As was the case in the discussion on the tasks of the presidency, there is no single or simple definition of success either. Presidencies are judged on a number of criteria such as impartiality, efficient handling of meetings, professional chairmanship, provision of an attractive agenda, effective – but not irritating – way of defending national interests, crisis management, and making a valuable contribution to the European integration process. Obviously, the emphasis on these

criteria will be contingent upon the specific issues with which the presidency is confronted.

Given the various ways of evaluating the presidency, the conclusion is therefore that such assessments should be based on each of the elements of success. One way to do this is to assess individual policy areas and characterize the behaviour of the chair according to the three dimensions presented in Figure 1.²⁷

Hence, conflicting expectations also emerge in the discussion on what makes a successful presidency. The conflicting tasks lead to conflicting criteria by which a member state will be evaluated. Avoiding the difficulties and opting for a purely neutral presidency (and evaluating it accordingly) may not be the best alternative.

4. Managing the presidency

The tensions presented in Figure 1 make it especially important to look at the organizational capacities of member states to coordinate conflicting expectations. The presidency is to a large extent an organizational function within the EU. The smooth handling of the agenda requires an efficient and effective way of preparing topics, coordinating the national position and ensuring coherence and persistence. Moreover, any weaknesses in the management of EU affairs within the member state in office will be visible on a European – if not global – level. If the management challenges are not adequately dealt with at national level this may cause embarrassing situations and mistakes and may lead to a sub-optimal output.

A thorough examination of the interministerial policy coordination system as part of the preparation process would therefore seem to be required.²⁸ However, coordination in the context of the presidency is not an undisputed area. In discussions with national officials and with officials from the Council Secretariat it appeared that not everyone is convinced that coordination is an important topic. Instead, some have argued that the task of a chairman is to ensure progress within the group. The chair can, according to this view, progress quite independently.

Nevertheless, it is also possible to argue that coordination of European affairs in the context of the presidency is important and that it is much harder than under normal circumstances. Coordination is never easy due to, among other things, differences between ministries with substantive interests and general ministries and due to sensitivities involved in sharing responsibilities. It will be even more difficult during the presidency because of the additional workload and the different perspectives from which coordination has to take place.

Coordination during the presidency is not just more difficult. It is also different. Hence member states require not just more, but different coordination capacities. First of all, coordination is different due to the fact that the presidency has to live up to the three conflicting expectations. In this respect, the country in office can be seen as a juggler who has to keep three balls up in the air

on a windy market square. During the presidency it is not so much a question of formulating national negotiating positions; the country at the helm also has to ensure a neutral chair and be able to provide leadership. Having argued that national interests cannot be ignored, it is of course necessary to re-emphasize that these interests must not stand in the way of achieving outcomes.²⁹ National and sectoral interests therefore have to be suppressed when necessary. Under normal circumstances it is an accepted part of the game that delegations defend national interests. During the presidency, chairmen, in the end, may have to be neutral and national delegates should be careful not to create unnecessary waves during meetings. This does not mean that presidencies should always be neutral. In some cases, member states are expected to be ambitious. In other cases it will be possible to combine the chairmanship role with defending national positions (e.g. through good cooperation between chairman and delegate). However, what is required is a continuous checking and weighing of national and 'presidency' interests, and an ability to make adjustments to its role when necessary (similar to the juggler who has to constantly monitor his movements to keep the three balls in the air).

Secondly, coherence between Councils may have to be ensured. One topic, for example the preparations for the UN climate conferences, may affect other Councils (e.g. environment, agriculture, transport, energy and finance). A member state should then be careful not to present different positions in different fora, and should see to it that outcomes of the Councils are compatible. Coordination between Councils has always been problematic³⁰, because, among other reasons, the Commission is more oriented towards progress in individual areas. Coherence, where necessary, is therefore the responsibility of the presidency. This demands overview and an ability to link Councils, as well as mechanisms to solve problems quickly in order to prevent national differences from hindering progress in the various Councils.

Finally, the leadership (or visionary) requirement may demand capacities from the chair to develop longer-term strategic views on the integration process. As remarked above, member states have invested little in these strategic capacities.

As a result of these differences imposed by the office of the presidency and the different perspectives from which coordination has to take place, a member state needs to have different coordination systems (compared with the 'normal' situation). In order to keep the three balls up in the air, it has to continuously monitor progress within the working parties and Councils in order to ensure an appropriate balance between national interests, leadership and neutrality. This requires efficient exchange of information and an ability to solve problems quickly. Moreover, it means that it has to be possible to take decisions on which position to adopt, on dropping national interests and on resuming the role of honest

broker.

The tendency of experts in substantive ministries to let national interests dominate demands a different balance between the substantive and general ministries. Obviously, the technical ministries, and especially the EU coordinators within them, are aware of the different roles that are expected of them during the presidency. Nevertheless, experience shows that experts may often still find it difficult to let go of national interests when this is required. A stronger position from the general ministries – arguably from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs – is therefore needed in order to exchange information, to monitor and control developments within the Council and to take decisions. It may also be desirable that Foreign Affairs keeps an eye on the progress within the Council in order to detect mistakes or aberrations from generally agreed principles (e.g. from the neutrality principle, from agreements to avoid increases in the EU budget, or from a decision to avoid negative environmental implications).

Clearly, this will demand a different coordination system in most member states because, generally, ministries do not like to be controlled – especially not by diplomats from Foreign Affairs who often do not hold the strongest positions in interministerial decision-making and who are not always admired for their expertise. Moreover, during the presidency, a government has to be able to take decisions quickly whereas, under normal circumstances, decisions may arise out of time-consuming efforts to find consensus among ministries. Open conflicts may be irritating when not in the chair, but should especially be avoided during the presidency (to remain credible as chairman and to prevent conflicts between Councils).³¹ Furthermore, Foreign Affairs ministries may have to encourage sectoral ministries at an early stage to take preparations seriously and to contact the Commission and member states in order to ensure that documents will be available on time and that output can be achieved within the limited period in office. This means that ministries, due to a natural inclination to give priority to national issues, may have to be persuaded to spend more time on European policies in the one or two years before the presidency.

Such considerations impose a need to examine the organizational strength of the EU affairs coordinators of the Foreign Affairs ministries and of the Prime Minister's Office.

The coordination requirements specified here run counter to the trend in member states to decentralize responsibilities for European policies to the level of individual ministries, and the weakening of the position of Foreign Affairs ministries.³² It is quite understandable, therefore, that questioning the appropriateness of interministerial coordination structures during the preparation for the presidency is a sensitive issue and that it may be perceived by the sectoral ministries as a threat to their autonomy. For that reason, Foreign Affairs ministries will also be reluctant to initiate the discussion

on their own position. Nevertheless, if this issue is not adequately addressed, the danger looms large that the existing system will be used without acknowledging the differences between EU policy coordination under normal circumstances and during the presidency.

This is not to say that member states do not set up new structures specifically for the presidency. Often specific task forces and teams are created around the Prime Minister, President or the Minister of Foreign Affairs.³³ However, the point is that even these structures are usually merely extrapolations of existing power structures. The existing power relations remain unaffected. For example, Foreign Affairs ministries generally assume their traditional coordinating role with a view to managing the presidency. Usually, the EU affairs coordinators do not acquire more decision-making powers or more room to monitor and control the behaviour of experts from substantive ministries.

Extrapolating policy coordination capacities signifies an underestimation of the specific presidency requirements. The effects can be recognized in most presidencies. Based on interviews with practitioners and EU officials as well as on academic literature, some examples³⁴ of this can be given. The Dutch presidency in 1991 proposed a highly federal-oriented draft for the Treaty revision and thus extrapolated its traditional views on European integration. Warnings from the EU affairs coordinators and the Permanent Representation had been taken too light-heartedly. The British government in 1992 was criticized for applying its pragmatic coordination system to the running of the presidency so that it continued to defend its own interests. The reputation of the Italian, German and Greek presidencies underlines the standard critique of fragmented national coordination systems.³⁵ Finally, the Irish were praised for their informal running of meetings, but were rebuked for lacking the vision and capacity to raise IGC discussions to a higher level.

This is not to say that good presidencies are rare.³⁶ However, it seems desirable, both with a view to managing the European integration process and for the prestige of member states, to pay more attention to the capacities for managing the presidency.

Managing or changing the presidency?

There is a long-standing debate about the position of the presidency and many proposals for reform have been put forward. The background to this debate is that the presidency overloads member states (especially small ones), that it is usually too fragmented to provide leadership or to coordinate between Councils, and that it is too costly. Various solutions for these shortcomings have been suggested, including formalizing the presidency's political leadership role and increasing the role of the Council Secretariat or the Commission. Of course not all of the frictions in the current system can be solved by upgrading the capacities within member states for handling the presidency. Nevertheless, better preparation and coordination at national level may fill

coordination and leadership gaps in decision-making within the Council and between the institutions.

5. Conclusions and need for further study

This paper has developed two interrelated arguments. The first deals with the tasks of the presidency. The chair has developed into an important factor in the EU decision-making system. But its tasks have not developed in a one-dimensional direction. Instead, the country in office has to be able to work under conflicting expectations. It has to combine, when required, neutrality, political leadership and national interests. Current research has barely touched on these conflicting tasks. This may explain why accounts of the position of the presidency emphasize the honest broker role. The danger of this is that national interests become taboo and that the need to provide leadership within the integration process is underestimated. It might be more realistic to see the presidency as a juggler with three sets of tasks in his hand.

This leads to a need to examine what presidencies actually contribute in practice to the integration process and whether and why they are important. Is it indeed the case that their role is restricted, as is often stated? Or do they in fact make a vital contribution to decision-making? This requires more research into EU decision-making at micro level (at the level of individual policy issues) and into the contribution of the presidency. The three – conflicting – tasks may provide a useful tool to characterize the behaviour of the chair.

The second argument concerns the fact that managing EU affairs during the presidency is not just more difficult than under normal circumstances, but that it is different and that different management structures are therefore demanded. Detailed examination of the interministerial structures for managing EU affairs is needed to validate this point. For this purpose, a model is required which makes it possible to describe and analyze interministerial policy coordination mechanisms.³⁷

The fact that different coordination structures may be needed also implies that preparation for presidency not only requires training officials, but also assessing the suitability of interministerial decision-making capacities.

These two arguments are interrelated. The different and conflicting tasks will require appropriate coordination mechanisms. It will therefore be interesting to see how the behaviour of the chair is related to the way in which a presidency is managed.

Such an exercise of comparing behaviour and structures will be particularly relevant if it can be related to an assessment of the success of the chair. Therefore, a third area of research should concern the assessment of the success of presidencies. This area has received remarkably little attention given the central position of the presidency in EU decision-making. One approach in this respect would be to acknowledge that presidencies have to carry out different tasks and to appraise them accordingly – rather than argue that they have conflicting

tasks and that they therefore cannot be evaluated. This would imply peer group analysis. For example, colleagues from the other member states in working parties would be well placed to assess whether the chair was effective in running meetings, steering discussions in useful directions and handling national interests. Moreover, the internal agenda of the chair can be researched in order to examine what kind of balance was chosen between national interests, leadership and neutrality. The comparison with the management capacities may subsequently offer an explanation for the findings on whether the chair was effective.

These lines of research may lead to a better understanding of the tasks of the presidency, of the management challenges and of how to prepare for presidency. They may also contribute to an upgrading of the EU decision-making system. Besides, if member states are better equipped to live up to the conflicting expectations then there may be less need to change the current presidency system.

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article développe deux arguments qui sont reliés entre eux. Le premier porte sur les tâches de la présidence. La présidence s'est affirmée au cours du temps comme un facteur important dans le système décisionnel de l'Union européenne. Cependant ses tâches ne se sont pas développées dans une direction unidimensionnelle. Par ailleurs, le pays exerçant la présidence doit être capable de travailler dans le cadre d'attentes conflictuelles. Il doit combiner, lorsque la situation l'impose, neutralité, leadership politique et intérêts nationaux. La recherche en son état actuel ne s'est pratiquement pas penchée sur ces tâches conflictuelles, ce qui explique peut-être pourquoi les différentes analyses de la position de la présidence se limitent à souligner son rôle d'honnête intermédiaire. Cette situation comporte un danger: les intérêts nationaux risquent de devenir tabou et l'on risque de sous-estimer la nécessité de fournir un leadership dans le processus d'intégration. Il serait peut-être plus réaliste de considérer la présidence comme un jongleur devant jongler avec trois balles (séries de tâches). Ceci conduit à la nécessité d'examiner les contributions que les présidences apportent dans la pratique au processus d'intégration et de se demander si elles sont importantes et pour quelle raison.

Le deuxième argument concerne le fait que la gestion des affaires européennes pendant la présidence n'est pas simplement plus difficile que dans des circonstances normales, mais qu'elle est différente et que, pour cette raison, des structures de gestion différentes sont requises. Ce point doit être validé par un examen détaillé des structures interministérielles de gestion des affaires européennes.

Le fait que l'on puisse avoir besoin de structures de

coordination différentes implique aussi que la préparation à la présidence n'exige pas uniquement la formation des fonctionnaires mais requiert aussi une évaluation de l'adéquation des capacités décisionnelles interministérielles.

Ces deux arguments sont reliés entre eux; dès lors, il faudra des mécanismes de coordination appropriés pour accomplir ces tâches à la fois différentes et conflictuelles.

NOTES

1. This article relates to two EIPA programmes, i.e. the training and development programmes aimed at supporting member states in their preparations for presidency, and the comparative organizational study of interministerial decision-making capacities (Schout, 1998b).
2. 'EU presidency' has become an accepted term, even though it is not strictly accurate. The presidency does not involve chairing EP or Commission meetings. It would therefore be better, though more laborious, to refer to the full title 'presidency of the Council of the European Union'.
3. In some countries, notably the UK, Finland and France, the generalist departments also include the Prime Minister's office (see O'Nuallain, 1985). Ministries of Finance also assume generalist perspectives in EU policy coordination; given the limited space available, however, we will not deal with them here specifically.
4. Generally, the presidency is not seen as a European institution but as a function within the Council. Given its importance in intergovernmental and interinstitutional decision-making, it might, however, be regarded as a separate institution next to Council, Commission and EP, among others.
5. See also, for example, Blair's statements at the start of the British presidency that the UK would now provide leadership in Europe. This resulted in critique from other member states about the 'arrogant' British posture (see the Financial Times, 5 January 1998). Another possible example of overplaying the hand of the presidency is the Dutch presidency in 1991 (for an account of the events and the reactions from other countries, see Laursen and Vanhoonacker, 1992 and 1994). Moreover, national and European Parliamentarians have, in the past, shown a great desire for active presidencies. They criticized, for example, the recent Dutch and British presidencies on the grounds of lack of ambition and neglect of national interests.
6. The Guardian, 9 January 1998.
7. See Bulmer and Wessels (1978), Dinan (1994), Westlake (1995), Hayes-Renshaw (1997).
8. For example, divisions such as North-South, net benefiter-payer, and European-transatlantic orientation.
9. Some strong Commissions are the proverbial exceptions, e.g. the first Delors Commission.
10. Kirchner (1992).
11. This gap has been filled to some extent by the French-German axis. However, this has not resulted in a consistent leadership function (cf. external relations of the EU), and it has not always been in the interest of all 15 member

- states (especially the smaller ones). Moreover, this close alliance has been based on close personal relations.
12. Probably the most telling expression of the confusion is the title of 'presidency of the European Union', which indicates an intergovernmental function within a federal context. In the original concept of the Union the Commission would assume political and mediating functions.
 13. These can be found, for example, in the Rules of Procedures from the Council Secretariat (1979) and Wallace (1985). Some observers have argued that the tasks should be formalized in the Treaty (Committee of Three, 1979; Ludlow, 1995). However, the flexibility of the current situation allows a presidency to adapt its style to the difficulties of specific phases in the integration process.
 14. The limited space available prevents a discussion on what the leadership role of the presidency involves. Relevant leadership models can be found in, for example, Pfeffer (1981, 1994) and Majone (1989, Chapter 4 'The uses of constraints').
 15. See, for example, Dinan (1994) who indicates that the major sacrifices made by the German government during the budget negotiations in 1988 were instigated by the fact that Germany held the presidency during the finalization of the financial framework. See also Wurzel (1996), who compares the environmental agendas of the British and German presidencies and finds they are quite similar despite the traditional differences between these countries in this area.
 16. See the example of the preparation of the climate conference (in Kyoto) under the Dutch presidency. During its period in office, the Netherlands stressed the importance of high levels of protection within the EU in order to put pressure on the other UN partners (mainly the USA and Japan). However, after the presidency the Minister for the Environment had to ask for lower standards because the outcome achieved in the Environment Council was too expensive for the Netherlands (NRC, 5 May 1998). Similar examples can be found for other member states.
 17. See, for example, Hine (1995), George and Sowemimo (1998).
 18. See, for example, Dankert (1992), or the presentations of the presidency programmes by Foreign Affairs Ministers to the EP. See also Rood (1997) on the preparations for the Dutch presidency in 1997.
 19. Council Guide, Vol. 1, *Presidency Handbook* (1996, p. 5, emphasis in the original). This handbook also refers to the political dimension, but limits it to establishing the order of priority on the agenda.
 20. One argument frequently used to argue in favour of neutrality is the idea that neutrality will create goodwill. This goodwill will serve the member states in the years after the presidency. However, one can of course wonder whether goodwill really pays off. Officials leave after a few years and, in the fight for influence, goodwill may not be a hard currency (see Rozemond, 1998).
 21. Palmer (1996).
 22. One example in this respect is the Dutch ministry responsible for the environment.
 23. Committee of Three (1979).
 24. De Schoutheete (1997).
 25. In a similar vein, Wallace (1985, p. 272) remarks that member states emphasize current business and that little attention is being paid to a 'think-tank' approach or to longer-term planning. Her explanations for this lack of strategic thinking include: 1) the substantive interests of member states may stand in the way, 2) the volume of work uses up the available energy, and 3) the 6-month time-frame prevents the development of collective interests.
 26. See, for example, the diametrically opposed assessments of the British presidency in 1992 by Ludlow (1993) and Garel-Jones (1993).
 27. General statements on the presidency will hardly be possible. One could argue that 'the presidency' does not exist but that each of the (approximately 150) working parties, and each of the other fora in which the 15 member states meet during a presidency, has its own style.
 28. For the sake of argument, this discussion will not explore intraministerial capacities. For details of the link between the intra- and interministerial management of EU affairs, see Schout (1998a).
 29. As has been the case, for example, with the previous British presidency in 1992 (see Ludlow, 1993). Council Secretariat officials are in a good position to give examples of chairmen from other member states who have made similar mistakes of confusing the presidency role with the standard role of defending national interests.
 30. Bulmer and Wessels (1978); Westlake (1995).
 31. The 'Kyoto' case during the Dutch presidency is one example where open conflict existed. The results were inconsistencies between Councils and the need for the Minister responsible for the environment to admit after the presidency that the targets reached were too high for the Netherlands so that they now have to be adjusted.
 32. See the discussion on the domestic management of EU affairs in Wright (1996).
 33. See, for example, O'Nuallain (1985) and Humphreys (1997).
 34. Admittedly, these examples are overly simplified due the difficulties in evaluating presidencies.
 35. See, for example, Wallace (1985) and Hine (1995).
 36. Even though some observers seem to suggest this (e.g. Humphreys, 1997).
 37. One such model can be found in Schout 1998a (see also Schout 1998b). The model is based on three different types of coordination mechanisms. These are 1) bureaucratic coordination capacities (standard operating procedures, general policy principles and detailed specifications of objectives, preferred outcomes and worst-case scenarios), 2) resources (human resources, coordinating units and analysis of the tasks of these units), and 3) horizontal coordination capacities (informal relations, task forces, teams at management level, integrating officers and the presence of managers with decision-making powers in horizontal relations). These coordination mechanisms provide a map to compare capacities for managing presidencies between member states as well as for comparing systems for normal management of EU affairs and for managing presidencies with one country.

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