

Opportunities and Challenges of a Small State Presidency: The Estonian Council Presidency 2017

Jana Bendel and Gunnhildur Lily Magnúsdóttir

ABSTRACT

This article discusses some of the opportunities and challenges that the Estonian Council presidency is facing during its first term in 2017. We also explore how Estonia is likely to approach this position. The Council presidency provides a position to propagate national interests and an opportunity for leadership within the Council but can also be perceived as a silencer of the domestic narrative. We claim that the Estonian presidency is expected to silence its interests in most policy areas in order to portray Estonia as a pro-European mediator. Through qualitative text analysis of key documents, interviews with Estonian, Danish, Finnish, and Latvian officials and comparative reflections of these states' presidencies, we find that Estonia is likely to exercise a problem-solving leadership during its term and that the main challenge and opportunity will be the further Europeanisation of its public administration.

Key words: Estonia; European Union; Council Presidency; Public Administration; Leadership

1. Introduction

The Presidency of the European Union Council of Ministers is one of the key institutional players in the EU negotiation game. The Presidency is regarded by other actors as a leader, providing visions of the future and guiding the integration process towards these new goals. When deadlocks occur in lengthy decision-making processes, eyes are turned towards the Presidency: it is supposed to come up with creative proposals and to broker compromises that are 'yesable' to all member states (Elgström 2003, 1).

The Council presidency (hereinafter the presidency) is a significant European Union (EU) institution and comes with great responsibility. For small EU member states with limited traditional power, such as Estonia, the rotating presidency can provide a power platform for agenda-setting within the Council of Ministers. In this case,

the presidency provides the incumbent with a position to propagate national interests as well as an opportunity to exercise leadership within the EU (Elgström 2003; Panke 2012; Magnúsdóttir 2010). Additionally, the presidency gives the state in question an opportunity to enhance its reputation within the EU and strengthen its relationship with the Commission, while also gathering good will and respect from the other member states (Magnúsdóttir 2010; Bunse 2009; Panke 2011).

Simultaneously, most presidencies are also faced with situations where they need to act as silencer of the domestic narrative, and therefore, the presidency represents a position with limited power (Bengtsson et al. 2004; Elgström 2003; Thomson 2008). This leans on the claim that the agenda of the EU Council has been set long before the presidency's term, and the incumbent's influence on the agenda is therefore limited (Bengtsson et al. 2004; also Magnúsdóttir 2010). In addition, the fact that the institution of the presidency has not formally been given any powers to initiate the Council's agenda supports the "no power" claim (Tallberg 2003). Furthermore, this line of argument is closely connected to the notion of neutrality and being an "honest broker", meaning that the incumbent's main role is to mediate between member states without displaying its own interests (Elgström 2003; Magnúsdóttir 2010). However, conflict avoidance is a well-known small state strategy and a potential power resource (Kajnáč and Svetličič 2010; Magnúsdóttir 2010; Bunse 2009; Panke 2012), which may offer the small state presidency an "... ample opportunity to defend its own interest" in the background and "enables it to defend its national interests effectively" (Kajnáč and Svetličič 2010, 85).

In this article, we aim to discuss specific opportunities and challenges that Estonian officials expect the Estonian presidency to face during its term. We also aim to explore how the Estonian presidency is likely to approach the position and lead as an incumbent. Grounded in small state literature, we claim that Estonia is expected to lean more towards the problem-solving approach, where national interests might be silenced in order to portray Estonia as a pro-European member state. This claim is based on Estonia's national identity and historical roots and its ties to Russia. During the struggle for independence from the Soviet Union, the Baltic States had to rebuild their nations and identities from scratch in order to protect their culture and language (Solska 2011; Mole 2012). In joining the EU, a new platform for identity formation towards further Westernisation emerged (see Feldman 2001; Baillie 1998), and holding the presidency is a significant stepping stone in this process.

Estonia, which gained its re-independence in 1991 after more than half a decade of Soviet occupation, has been an EU member state since 2004. Historical, geographical and geopolitical factors have a great influence on Estonian's national identity, which is often described as a "Return to Europe" narrative (Feldman 2001). Estonia has been trying to escape its post-Soviet shadow by emphasising its Western values and identity as a "good" European state. Increased Russian activities in the Baltic Sea, the annexation of Crimea and the expected turn in US foreign policy with the Trump administration – such as decreased US support for NATO – are all factors that have brought back the fear of the Eastern neighbour. This has made the EU seem a safe harbour and a path towards further Westernisation, increasing the distance from the East (Solska 2011; also Feldman 2001; Mole 2012). Moreover, the Council presidency term might have a significant influence on Estonia's national identity

formation, as it provides a perfect platform to further establish itself as a pro-European member state. This means that Estonia might deem it necessary to sacrifice its current national interests for the common European agenda since long-term gains of a positive pro-European image might be more important.

In addition, at a time of multiple internal as well as external challenges that the EU and its member states are facing, Estonia's presidency is both put in the spotlight but might also get overshadowed by these European struggles. Internal struggles in the face of Brexit, growing terrorism, migration crises and increasing populism, to mention but a few, are all provoking European unity and contesting the strengths of the union (Archick 2017; Estonian official B, April 2017). Additionally, the threats from Russia, transatlantic uncertainties and crises in the Middle East are all important factors that the incumbent needs to deal with. Furthermore, small state presidencies are confined by the historical and geopolitical context to a greater extent than larger states, as they lack the economic and administrative capacity to affect both the surrounding structure and the agenda of the Council of Ministers (Bunse 2006; Thorhallsson 2000; Magnúsdóttir, 2010). Hence, it is likely that common European concerns leave limited room for Estonia to pursue its own agenda during the presidency term.

Furthermore, it should be noted that the role and the importance of the office of the presidency have changed with the Lisbon Treaty. Firstly, the representation role of the presidency has been compromised with the establishment of the permanent presidency of the European Council. Moreover, the manoeuvre for agenda-setting and amplification of national interests by the individual presidencies has also diminished with a further emphasis on formal cooperation within the troikas of Council presidencies outlined in the Lisbon Treaty. These changes might have limited the "amplifying opportunities" of the office, which have been so important for the small member states (Howard Grøn and Wivel 2011).

The role of the Council presidency is widely discussed in the academic field and, as mentioned above, includes two main approaches – the silencer and the amplifier – elements that are usually both visible with most presidencies. However, depending on the state's approach to the presidency as an amplifier or silencer of national interests, it is hard to establish whether or not a presidency is portrayed as successful or not as there is no clear definition of success within the study of the office (with few exceptions: see Bunse 2009 or Vandecasteele and Bossuyt 2014).¹ With this article, we hope to contribute to scholarship debating the presidency's success, with a specific focus on what a successful presidency term entails for a small member state. Furthermore we aim to explore the main claim of the study, namely that Estonia will most likely be a problem-solving presidency ready to silence its national interests, by primarily investigating the challenges and opportunities of the upcoming presidency. These are, among other things, connected to the transformation of Estonia's public

¹ The absence of a general measuring scale for a presidency's success or influence makes it difficult to determine the nature of the presidency's performance. Vandecasteele and Bossuyt (2014, 240) claim that "the difference between influence and success approaches can indeed be framed within the national and the EU level", meaning that when the national governments have brought a decision closer to their preferences, the presidency is measured by influence; whereas, when the decisions are made on the EU level, the presidency has carried out a successful job.

administration. Moreover, we focus on how Estonia is expected to behave during its time in office. Our focus on Estonia's approach to its very first Council presidency² gives a unique insight into Estonia's behaviour during its term as well as as a member of the Council. Nevertheless, further research on the Council presidencies of small Eastern European member states is warranted (see Svetličič and Cerjak 2015; Kajne and Svetličič 2010), which have not been as thoroughly explored as the Western European small member states, such as the Scandinavian states (Laffan and O'Mahony 2007; xMagnusdottir 2010 Bengtsson et al. 2004; Tallberg 2001).

In our study of Estonia's first Council presidency, we make use of our own previous research on the Scandinavian Council presidencies, especially the Finnish presidency, as we find similarities with Finland's first presidency in 1999 and its early years of membership, when Finland was also establishing its own identity within the EU as well as distancing itself from Russia (Magnusdottir 2010; Arter 2000, interviews with Finnish officials 2008-2009; Estonian officials 2016 and 2017). Furthermore, we use two additional member states for comparative purposes – Denmark and Latvia – where the former is an old and experienced member state with a rather Euro-sceptical approach towards the EU and the latter a relatively new member state and a first-time holder of the presidency in 2015. These cases will help us explore which challenges and opportunities Estonia will be faced with and how it will approach its presidency in 2017.

We start by discussing our theoretical framework, including a brief section on definitions of small states before proceeding to the discussion on the conceptual tools of the study and the outline of the methods and material used. Thereafter, we evaluate the opportunities and challenges facing the upcoming Estonian presidency. We then uncover indications of how Estonia will likely behave through key policy documents, outlining the aims of the Estonian presidency, coupled with the results of our interviews with Estonian, Finnish, Danish and Latvian officials. Furthermore, we draw lessons from the Finnish, Danish and Latvian Council presidencies in our exploration of Estonia's time in office. Finally, we discuss the main conclusions of our study and suggest possible future research.

2. Conceptual Framework: Leadership and Identity of Small States

We start our theoretical discussion, which is grounded in various small state literature and leadership theories, by addressing the ongoing debate on how to define a small state and their national interests, and then move on to discussing small states' leadership and identity.

2.1. How to Define a Small State?

Definitions of the concept of a small state usually start by focusing on quantitative factors such as population size, territorial size, gross domestic product and/or mili-

² Estonia was scheduled to hold its first presidency term shortly after its accession in 2004 but declined the offer because it was believed that the Estonian public administration was not ready for it (Estonian official B, April 2017).

tary capacity (Thorhallsson 2006b). The most common and important of these definitions is probably the size of the population. The infrastructure of the EU supports the standpoint that a population size is an important variable. According to Thorhallsson (2006 a and b), population size and the other three aforementioned quantitative variables (territory, GDP and military capacity) are still considered to be the best criteria for analysing states' behaviour in the international system, but other variables need to be added when analysing how size affects the behaviour of states within the EU (Thorhallsson 2006b; Magnúsdóttir and Thorhallsson 2011).

The importance of these four quantitative measurements has its roots in 19th-century Europe, when the success of states was dependent upon their defence capabilities. A large population could provide both a large workforce to secure economic prosperity and equally important a large number of soldiers to build up significant military capacity. Considerable GDP was a necessary prerequisite to build up a large army, which could both provide defence and promote foreign territorial expansion. Finally, the size of the territory was important both in agrarian and industrial societies for securing resources. A state with a large territory had a better chance than a state with a small territory of guaranteeing its agrarian and industrial production and thereby providing a basis both for economic gains and military capacity (Thorhallsson 2006b, 8-9, Magnúsdóttir and Thorhallsson 2011).

In traditional political thought, where states were defined according to these four criteria which shaped their ability to defend themselves, small states were seen as states that were not considered a threat or danger to the neighbouring states (Goetschel 1998, 12). Small states were considered to have little control over their own security, which was determined by states with greater military capacity. This classical realist definition of a small state assumes that "small" equals "weak" and that small states are "fragile creatures in the rough sea of international relations" (Goetschel 1998, 13). Associated with a state's military capacity is the traditional power aspect. Power, one of the most fundamental concepts in political science, is seen there as an indicator of a state's smallness. Power is in this context defined both in a positive and negative sense. In a positive sense; power is the capability to modify the behaviour or actions of others in the manner one desires. In a negative sense; power is the ability to prevent others from affecting one's own behaviour (Singer 1972, 54, see also Handel 1981 and Keohane 1969). According to Goetschel (1998), the first form of power can be called *influence* and the latter form *autonomy*, and small states are defined as states that suffer both from an influence deficit and an autonomy deficit. They have relatively little influence in the international system, and their autonomy in the international system is also small (Goetschel 1998, 14-15).

The aforementioned quantitative size factors are a relevant starting point for this article, as these factors greatly affect states' behaviour when at the helm of the Council presidency. This is especially important in the small state context, since the meagre quantitative powers based on population size within the EU institutions and the smallness of their national administration limit the scope of action of small states' presidencies and force them to turn to qualitative or cognitive power resources, for instance based on their image, mediation skills or expertise (Magnúsdóttir 2010; Thorhallsson 2006b; Keohane 1969; Bunse 2009; Underdal 1994 Malnes 1995; Young 1991)

Several scholars have attempted to take more subjective factors, such as self-perception and the perception of others, into account when defining the size of states. Such definitions also need to be taken into consideration in the current study, since the self-perception of the Council presidency as a leader and mediator and other actors' perception of the presidency are crucial factors in the on-going multilateral negotiations within the Council. We are primarily inspired by Thorhallsson's size framework, which not only includes the aforementioned quantitative size factors but also two qualitative size factors relevant for our study. Thorhallsson's fifth size factor is a qualitative size factor called "perceptual size" and is concerned with how both various domestic and external actors regard the state. Thorhallsson (2006b, 24) claims that "The view of domestic and international actors concerning a state's size, particularly in comparison with other states, is of essential importance in determining its internal and external actions."

Estonia's identity or perceptual size is especially important within the EU, where the member states meet repeatedly in negotiations and therefore have a chance of building a reputation or image known to the other actors. As Thorhallsson stresses, a state's self-perception is also of great importance. He takes examples from Scandinavia and claims that the political elites in Sweden and Denmark have considered their states to have a considerable internal and external capacity even though some may regard them as small in the international context. He argues that the Nordic states have acted in accordance with this perception on the international arena, such as in peace-keeping and international mediation (Thorhallsson 2006b, 24-25, see also, e.g., Ingebritsen 2006, 14). The sixth and last determining size category is called "preference size" and refers to ambitions and prioritisations of the governing elite and its ideas about the international system (Thorhallsson 2006b, 25). The preference size of the Estonian Council presidency is also relevant for our study, as it can be claimed that it affects the leadership style and prioritisations of the presidency.

2.2 Small States' National Interest

Related to the definition of "a small state" is the concept of "national interest". The discourse of national interest is important in the EU context, as it can be viewed as a key element of leaders' negotiation strategies to maximize their bargaining positions (Milzow 2012, see also Svetličič and Cerjak 2015). Therefore, it is essential to briefly address the question of national interest, although it should be emphasised that we do not aim to contribute to the definition of "national interest" of small states, but rather focus on Estonian interest, as further explored in the analysis.

Milzow (2012, 5) claims that two opposing views dominate among scholars on how to define "national interest". On the one side there are those that claim that "national interest" lacks analytical meaning due to the variety of interests, and on the other side those who believe that "national interest" is simply "what a particular government says it is". Traditional IR theorists, especially realists, would lean towards the latter view and claim that small states have relatively few national interests compared to great powers, since their power in the international system limits their preferences, or as outlined above by Goetschel (1998, 13) "small" equals

“weak” in the international system (see also Pham 2015; Svetličič and Cerjak 2015; Milzow 2012). On the other side, constructivists, with Wendt on the forefront (1992; see also Svetličič and Cerjak 2015) would argue that interests are not given and rather emerge when interacting with other actors, which in the EU context would mean that member states shape each other’s national interests.

It should also be noted in this context that Katzenstein explained, in his seminal work on “Small States in World Markets”, that small states are more vulnerable to changes in the economic sphere (as well as the political and military spheres) than the larger states because small states, among other things, rely more on imports (Katzenstein 1985, 81). Katzenstein also noted that small states’ economies are usually focused on fewer sectors than large economies and small states therefore do not hold strong national interests in as many policy areas as the large states do. This has also been researched in the context of small state presidencies and small state negotiation strategies within the Council, where the small member states are said to both have lighter political baggage, thus holding strong national interests in fewer policy areas than the larger states, and are also forced to prioritise and define their national interests narrowly due to their limited administrative and economic capacities (Thorhallsson 2000; Magnúsdóttir 2010; Bunse 2009; Laffan and O’Mahony 2007).

This is also in line with our understanding of Estonia’s narrow national interests and prioritisations of the Council presidency, which are to be found both in interview results with Estonian officials and in key documents such as Estonia’s EU Policy 2015-2019, the latest Coalition Agreement 2016-2019 and the Presidency Action Plan. Thus, in this article we define Estonia’s national interests as expressed both in the aforementioned documents and by Estonian officials.

2.3 The Importance of Identity

We are inspired by social constructivism in our conceptual framework as it helps us to understand the importance of Estonia’s national identity and how the EU shapes the identity of small states. Social constructivism is a relevant supplement, as it has enabled studies in the field of small states with its focus on international norms, identity and ideas. Ever since the end of the Cold War, ideational factors have given small states an increased scope to manoeuvre in the foreign policy field (Neumann and Gstöhl 2006). As one of the basic tenets of constructivism suggests that “... the identities and interests of purposive actors are constructed by these shared ideas rather than given by nature” (Wendt 1999, 1), small states are able to socially contract new and more favourable identities in their relationships with other states (Neumann and Gstöhl 2006).

Wendt (1999, 224) defines the identity of international actors as “a subjective or unit-level quality, rooted in an actor’s self-understanding” and adds that this understanding often depends on whether or not an actor views another actor in the same way as it perceives itself. Thereby, as both an actor’s self-perception and other actors’ views play a significant role in the identity, it can be concluded that “identities are constituted by both internal and external structures” (Wendt 1999, 224; also Magnúsdóttir and Thorhallsson 2011; Magnúsdóttir 2010). This is in line with Thorhallsson’s (2006b) argumentations when outlining a state’s “perceptual size”,

which is concerned with how both various domestic and external actors regard the state. Thorhallsson (2006b, 24) claims that “the view of domestic and international actors concerning a state’s size, particularly in comparison with other states, is of essential importance in determining its internal and external actions.” Therefore, a state’s self-image and international image are interlinked and form a potential power resource, or – as Goetschel (1998) explains it – a small state needs to perceive itself as a strong state and act accordingly in order to shape its international identity and influence other actors’ perception of the state in question.

A state’s identity or perceptual size is especially important within the EU, where the member states meet repeatedly in negotiations and therefore have a chance of building a reputation or image known to the other actors. We draw lessons from our previous research on the Scandinavian Council presidencies, which have made use of their favourable international images in, for example, environmental politics, gender politics and international mediation, when at the helm of the Council presidency (Magnusdottir 2010; see also Thorhallsson and Wivel 2006; or Ingebritsen 2006).

Wendt (1999) introduces four kinds of identities: 1) personal or corporate, 2) type, 3) role and 4) collective, and claims that an actor can have multiple identities that are activated selectively depending on the actor’s situation. In the Estonian context, we claim that the collective European identity is likely to be dominant during the Council presidency term. However, as identities are arrayed hierarchically depending on an actor’s degree of commitment to them – and a great deal depends on how much the identity is threatened by outside factors (Wendt 1999) – it can be explained why some states approach the presidency differently to others. For Estonia and Latvia (and Finland during its first presidency term in 1999), due to their geographical positions and new membership status, the European identity is more important than, for instance, for Denmark, which throughout its long EU membership history has always kept one foot out the door via its opt-outs (Magnusdottir 2010; Miles 1996). Besides, as small states tend to rely on international organisations and value institutionalisation to a greater extent than larger states, they form a “type identity” with other small states. This type identity is also associated with the presidency, where small states are often expected to be more successful than larger ones. Type identity is based on similar characteristics such as values, knowledge and similarities in history. The formation of type identity is dependent on the perception of others. It might be argued that small EU member states have, for instance, some sort of type identity linked to their presidency term, since many of them have been perceived as highly successful mediators and problem-solving leaders when at the helm of the presidency (Magnusdottir 2010; Panke 2011). Therefore, Estonia might identify itself with these small states’ presidencies and benefit from this throughout its presidency term.

2.4 Leadership of the Small State Council Presidency

In the literature on small states’ leadership, we primarily find two types of leadership which are helpful in deepening our understanding of the opportunities and challenges that small state Council presidencies are faced with. The first types are

leaders that often act on their own by setting examples and aim to direct others on the path that is favourable to the leader. The second types are leaders that have a problem-solving approach, often acting as mediators, but who can still hold strong interests in the negotiations themselves. Different scholars use different terminology when talking of these two types.

Underdal (1994) presents the unilateral leader, who tries to solve collective problems on his own by setting the pace for others to follow. An important feature of unilateral leadership is that it is exercised outside formal negotiations, such as Council negotiations (Underdal 1994). Small states wanting to influence the decision-making process in a certain policy area can therefore try to act as unilateral leaders, for example through example-setting and persuasion *before* starting their term as the Council presidency. Thus, one might argue that Estonia has had an opportunity to establish itself as a leader in digital market solutions, where it has a strong reputation.

Similarly, Malnes (1995) presents a leadership type available to small states called directional leadership. The directional leader aims to direct other actors' behaviour to adopt a particular line of policy. Directional leadership is based on a particular way of influencing actors, that is, directing people by shaping their beliefs, values and interests without using coercion or deception. The directional leader also tries to promote a common goal for the actors involved. Directional leadership can be exercised by small states running the presidency. Nevertheless, compared to Underdal (1994), Malnes does not emphasise the need for a dominant position for directional leaders but places stronger emphasis on the power of knowledge (see also Young 1991; Magnúsdóttir 2010). However, Malnes' other type of leadership – problem-solving leadership – is more closely linked to any sort of mediation, such as the Council presidency.

The problem-solving type of leadership is most relevant for our study, as these leaders base their legitimacy on their skills as mediators or honest brokers in multilateral negotiations, which the up-coming Estonian presidency greatly emphasises. Such leaders are often agents themselves in the formal negotiations (such as Council presidents), and therefore they not only try to find a common solution to the problem but simultaneously strive to maximise their self-interests. This sort of leadership has often been exercised successfully by small states, for example when holding the presidency within the EU (Brown 2000; Tallberg 2001; Magnúsdóttir 2010). For example, Finland, Sweden and Denmark have all been praised for running a successful presidency (Ingebritsen 2006; Elgström 2003; Brown 2000; Magnúsdóttir 2010), and the Nordic states have all acted successfully as mediators in international conflicts, which has enabled them to influence world politics (Ingebritsen 2004).

A successful performance as a mediator can be important in international cooperation, where negotiators meet again and have a presumed image of one other. A good reputation as mediators and/or problem solvers can also give small states a chance to participate and influence global politics as “insiders” in the middle of international conflicts that need to be solved. Thus, Underdal's (1994) instrumental leadership, Malnes' (1995) problem-solving leadership and Young's (1991) entrepreneurial leadership are all based on this common ground of problem-solving and the

need to find means to achieve common goals and to reconcile, “a role to which representatives of small countries and international secretariats with constrained mandates can also aspire” (Underdal 1994, 190). These leaders are accepted by the followers, not because they fear the leaders or hope to be rewarded but because they trust the leaders’ guidance and skills and believe that these leaders can find the way to a satisfactory agreement (Malnes 1995; Underdal 1994).

According to Underdal (1994, 188), “the instrumental” mode of leadership is more important in international negotiations than general negotiation theory would lead us to believe, since international negotiations are usually characterised by uncertainty, imperfect information and vague preferences (see also Iklé 1964). The act of diagnosing or discovering the problem and inventing and exploring possible solutions is a very important part of the negotiation process (Haas 1990). A successful instrumental leader does precisely so when he/she tries to act as mediator in multi-lateral negotiations. Instrumental leadership is primarily based on three capabilities of the leader: skill, energy and status. Skill refers to the leader’s capability to develop effective solutions (which resembles Young’s intellectual leadership to some extent) and the leader’s capability to lead the negotiations to a political consensus (which resembles Young’s entrepreneurial leadership). The amount of energy a leader brings to solving a problem in the negotiations is, of course, of great importance. The more there is at stake for the leader, the greater the effort he will make in order to reach the preferred outcome. Having strong interests is, however, certainly not always an advantage because the other negotiators might not consider the leadership neutral and legitimate if the leader has strong self-interests. Status refers to the formal role of the leader and also to his informal status within the negotiations. The relative weight of the formal and informal status varies between institutional and political settings, but both components are a necessary basis for a legitimate and respected leader (Underdal 1994).

Malnes (1995) presents similar forms of leadership as Underdal’s instrumental leader, although Malnes places less emphasis on these forms of leadership than on his directional leader. We find both Malnes’ problem-solving leader and Underdal’s instrumental leadership highly relevant for the upcoming Estonian presidency and do not in any way rank one leadership type above another, as the instrumental and problem-solving leaders have a common base, and both are useful for our analysis. Malnes’ problem-solving leader has superior problem-solving abilities and steps into the conflict in the negotiations in order to solve it. The problem-solving leader is an entrepreneur, ready to change the structural conditions that surround the actors’ decisions and present them with new opportunities and views. Furthermore, Malnes (1995) also presents the positional leader as an actor who can lay down the law for the other actors, due to his high position of authority, such as the Council presidency, which is either based on formal rules or informal norms. Malnes, however, emphasises that a leader’s position is not enough to give him/her real power. A state exercising positional leadership will only be perceived as a true leader if it has the ability to intervene and influence social affairs, either through problem-solving leadership or directional leadership.

3. Methods and Material

In order to assess Estonia's approach to its upcoming presidency and explore the challenges and opportunities Estonia will be facing during its presidency term, we offer a qualitative interpretivist analysis of: a) key documents of the upcoming Estonian Council presidency and b) semi-structured interviews with 24 relevant officials from Estonia, Denmark, Finland, and Latvia and make use of our own previous research on the Scandinavian Council presidencies and Latvia's first presidency term for comparative purposes. Our focus on Estonia's approach to the office complements other research on small states' presidencies as well as offers a unique insight into the preparation phase of the Estonian first presidency.

We primarily draw lessons from three empirical cases of other small EU member states – Denmark, Finland and Latvia – when investigating Estonia's expected behaviour in its upcoming term. The three empirical cases are interesting because they are all considered small EU member states. However, they all have similarities as well as differences compared to Estonia. We chose Denmark because of its long membership status and extended experience in holding the office of the presidency, which it has done on seven occasions. Denmark is also portrayed as a Euro-sceptical member state with its several opt-outs and critical rhetoric towards the Union (Hansen and Waever 2002). Finland is relevant to our case due to its similar approach to the presidency and struggle to strengthen its European identity in order to distance itself from neighbouring Russia. Finally, Latvia is the most similar case to Estonia due to its identical length of EU membership as well as pioneering in the presidency office in 2015. Furthermore, its historical and geographical similarities to Estonia made it an interesting case.

Our analysis follows two interconnected steps. First, we undertook a content analysis using two key policy documents published by the Estonian Government Office: "Action Plan for Preparations of the Estonian Presidency of the Council of the European Union" from 2015 (hereinafter the Action Plan) and "Estonia's European Union Policy 2015-2019" (hereinafter EUPOL) that both outline Estonia's approach to the EU and are informational in nature. In addition, in order to define Estonia's national interests, we also studied the Coalition Agreement for 2016-2019. When analysing these key documents, we looked for explicit and implicit references to Estonia's national identity or image as well as its planned approach to the presidency office and its reasoning to it. Furthermore, we looked for any references to the definition of successful presidency and its essential factors.

Secondly, we interviewed 24 relevant officials from government institutions from Estonia, Denmark, Finland and Latvia (find the list of institutions in the references). These officials were all middle-ranked or high-ranked officials involved in their country's presidency – the Estonian presidency in 2017, the Finnish presidencies in 1999 and 2006, the Danish presidency in 2012 and the Latvian presidency in 2015. The interviews provided us with insights into how the incumbents are preparing for the office as well as how success is defined by different officials. Furthermore, they provided us with the connection between the approach to the presidency and questions of national identity as well as enclosed some negotiation strategies used by their officials during the presidency. The interviews were semi-structured interviews

in person as well as by telephone, conducted in English, and the selection criteria for the interviewees was that the interviewees should preferably be middle- or high-ranking officials with more than 6 months of experience in the current position and have knowledge of their presidency. Anonymity was promised to all interviewees in order for them to be able to speak openly and freely.

4. Discussion: The Presidency – a Mixed Blessing?

In this chapter we will discuss the main opportunities and challenges which small states are faced with when at the helm of the Council presidency and the potential implications for Estonia. These opportunities/challenges are to be found in small public administration, states' identity formation, their relationship with the Commission, as well as in pursuing national interests. Thus, we will start by firstly analysing challenges and opportunities and secondly by discussing in what manner Estonia is most likely to approach the presidency and which leadership it is likely to exercise.

4.1. Small Public Administration

The office of the presidency represents a great deal of challenges and opportunities, especially for small member states. The size of administration plays an important role in member states' behaviour as Council presidencies and defining characteristics of small administrations therefore have to be taken into account when exploring small states' presidencies. In view of that, one of Estonia's main opportunities and challenges is the preparation and the transformation of its public administration, in order to equip it for the presidency term.

On a positive note (an opportunity), an Estonian official explained that the presidency is forming "[a] professional and really pro-European civil service for the future, which stays with us [Estonians] for decades to come and this is where we [Estonians] invest a lot" (Estonian official A, March 2016). Hence, the presidency provides the public administration with a unique experience of the EU's machinery and offers small states an opportunity to prove their effectiveness and promote their capabilities in the Union (see Magnusdottir 2010; Randma-Liiv 2002; Thorhallsson 2006a; Action Plan 2015), which in turn helps them gain legitimacy and support from other states, and might strengthen their identity (Danish official, April 2016; Wendt 1999). Estonia's Action Plan (2015) for the upcoming presidency reveals the significance of the presidency to the public administration, in alignment with the Estonian official's abovementioned claim, as it states that:

... The significant improvements in administrative capacity achieved during preparations for and implementation of the Presidency can be harnessed in the interest of Estonia after the Presidency. Therefore, the Presidency is an investment in the growth of the knowledge, skills and capabilities of the Estonian civil service and in the increase of our capacities for functioning within the EU (Action Plan 2015, 8).

Furthermore, networks and relationships have a central role in how capable the public administration is on a daily basis (Estonian official A, March 2016). In the public administration literature, small administrations, such as the Estonian one, are said to be characterised by factors such as “personalism” or strong networks of personal relationships within the administration, flexible adoption of administrative rules and informality in administration and, therefore, a small administration can be an advantage for Estonia. A Finnish official offers a great example of this advantage based on the Finnish civil service in relation to the first Finnish presidency in 1999 by explaining that “... [it] is easier to reorganize an administration and make changes where you have a clear overview of all parts of the administration and know exactly who to contact in every ministry about these things” (Finnish official, March 2007 in Magnusdottir 2010). Furthermore, small administrations put a strong emphasis on the prioritisation and mobility of workforce between administrative units and policy-making instead of only on implementation at various stages inside the administration, which can make them more efficient in those areas (Kattel et al. 2011; Jazbec 2010; Thorhallsson 2000; see also Laffan and O’Mahony 2007; Baker 1992).

Also, the presidency provides rare opportunities for individuals working in the field, as it creates a platform to show individual capabilities and could enable great career opportunities, which is supported by the Estonian official as well as the Danish one, according to whom the expertise of individual Danish civil servants on the EU level is highly valued due to their extensive experience in successful presidencies (see Randma-Liiv 2002; also Estonian official A, March 2016; Danish official, April 2016).

Nevertheless, a state’s administrative capability is usually considered to be more “size sensitive” (Kattel et al. 2011, 2) than many other quantitative factors determining a state’s external capacity (Thorhallsson 2006b). The size of the Estonian civil service is to be considered to be one of the main challenges or limitations within the EU due to the limited human resources and meagre financial means that, for instance, may lead to limited support for national officials in EU negotiations in comparison to officials from the larger member states (Savi and Randma-Liiv 2015; Magnusdottir 2010; Thorhallsson 2000). It should also be noted that the Estonian civil service suffered from extensive cutbacks in 2008-2012, which are likely to have increased the workload on individual officials, including those involved in European Union affairs (Savi and Randma-Liiv 2015). In order to successfully manage the presidency, Estonians will have to hire additional workforce to their public administration and invest in training and teaching these people with human as well as financial resources (Estonian official A, March 2016).

Furthermore, small member states have to prioritise between policy areas due to the small size of their administration (Thorhallsson 2006b; Magnusdottir 2010). Moreover, their narrow national interests might limit their insight and understanding of some policy area on the presidency’s agenda. Officials involved in the up-coming Estonian presidency raise such concerns since the Estonian civil servants have limited knowledge of policies where Estonia does not hold strong interests, despite the pro-European profile of the Estonian civil service. Hence, the Estonian civil service will be forced to gather knowledge and competence in areas which represent

European or global perspectives and potential issues and thus go beyond Estonians' experience (Estonian official A, March 2016). This, in addition, adds more time and work pressure to already limited human resources.

4.2. (European) Identity Formation and Image

In addition to the abovementioned opportunities and challenges, the presidency also provides an essential chance to participate in the integration processes and form/strengthen an internal European identity in Estonia. Estonian citizens often appear to perceive the EU as something foreign and do not feel part of it. The decisions made on the EU level often seem rather distant and sometimes dominant over domestic issues (Estonian official A, March 2016). Latvia was faced with similar problems prior to its presidency. However, according to a Latvian official (April 2016), the presidency provided an opportunity to close the gap in the "us vs. them" notion and formed a stronger European identity among its citizens. Estonian officials (March 2016; April 2017) expressed similar expectations: that Estonia's presidency term will not only result in a transformed and more pro-European public administration, but also in more pro-European views among the Estonian public. Interestingly, such expectations about further Europeanisation of the public were also expressed by Danish officials, who deemed the Danish presidency term important for raising EU awareness among Danish citizens (Magnusdottir 2010; Danish official, April 2016). Consequently, both new and old member states appear to regard the presidency term as an opportunity for further Europeanisation of the national identity. Furthermore, if Estonia performs well during its time in office and, for example, succeeds with its introduction of e-solutions, it will have a significant impact on its European image and credibility, which is vital for small member states, which rely on cognitive resources such as their image and expertise due to their limited quantitative resources.

To a small member state, especially to the new Eastern European members, the EU membership is essential to the state's (economic) survival, and thus a unified EU is important. In Estonia's EUPOL 2015-2019 document, the role and importance of the EU for Estonia was established as follows:

The cornerstones of the European Union's common values and cooperation are trust and solidarity, and Estonia is ready to contribute to their promotion. In planning and implementing its European Union policies for the period 2015-2019, Estonia abides by the principle that the EU must be strong, open, unified and capable to evolve. Estonia sees the EU as a solution to a number of challenges facing us ... (EUPOL 2015, 5)

The emphasis the document places on common values and the importance of the EU for Estonia portrays well the way in which Estonia regards the Union and how vital European cooperation is to a small member state. Throughout the policy document, the strong and unified Union is highlighted in addition to the notion of common solutions. Taking into consideration the importance of the EU to Estonia, as well as the fact that the policy document is essential to the presidency agenda,

the upcoming presidency offers a great opportunity to contribute to EU values and to enhance the European identity. Estonia therefore appears to aim at exercising a problem-solving leadership, where there might be limited room to amplify Estonian interests. Estonia will, at least most likely, frame its priorities as common European problems, which might, if successful, strengthen Estonia's reputation as an efficient mediator and a pro-European member state (Malnes 1995; Underdal 1994; Elgström 2003).

However, tensions might occur on the domestic level when trying to further the European identity, as it might seem forced upon the Estonian people. In Estonia, where national identity is still developing, furthering the European identity might create a situation where the public's trust in national politicians diminishes and they might be perceived as mere agents of the EU, prioritising common European interests instead of national interests. This type of tensions occurred in Estonia, for example during the refugee crisis in Europe in 2015, when quotas for member states to accept refugees were assigned. This situation raised great concerns in the Estonian society questioning the possible split between Eastern and Western Europe, as well as the weakness of the Union and its leaders (Postimees 2015b). It also brought out concerns over Estonia's membership and priorities. Nevertheless, the course of Estonia's government actions during the crisis can be translated as an attempt to strengthen Estonia's reputation with a pro-EU role-modelling behaviour. The chair of Estonia's Conservative People's Party, Mart Helme, has, for example, criticised the way in which the Estonian government secretly decided to voluntarily contribute to the EU's plans to deal with the refugee crisis and the government's attempts to contribute to the "hypothetical European solidarity" by implementing "systematic repression" on European people (Postimees 2015a).

This discourse follows similar patterns as in many other EU states where we have seen increased Euro-scepticism and support for more restrictive asylum policies. Extensive debates about refugees and a so-called "tolerance debate" in one of the most popular media outlets in Estonia, *Postimees*, also mirror such views and the public's dissatisfaction with how the decisions were made (Postimees 2015c). This type of discourse in Estonian media might hinder further development of the European identity in Estonia and prevent the Estonian presidency from exercising a self-sacrificing unilateral or problem-solving leadership.

During its presidency in 2017, in addition to the Commission's objectives and plans, Estonia's preferences also have a significant impact on the Council agenda (Elgström 2003; see also Tallberg 2003; Bunse 2006; Action Plan 2015). Estonia's preliminary agenda reveals that the Estonian presidency aims at focusing on the single market, digital market, energy Union and closer integration of Eastern Partnership countries in Europe (Action Plan 2015). Furthermore, in regard to the presidency's agenda, Estonia has also shown a desire to "advance the information society and promote e-solutions within the EU policies" (Action Plan 2015, 11). With its focus on e-solutions and the digital market, Estonia has the opportunity to strengthen its image as an expert and even a role model on the digital market, which is a well-known strategy of small states exercising a directional or unilateral leadership, primarily based on knowledge, unilateral behaviour and convincing scientific arguments rather than quantitative power (Underdal 1995; Young 1991; Magnúsdóttir

2010; Thorhallsson 2006a). On the same note, as expressed in the Action Plan (2015), Estonia is well aware of its strengths, especially within the e-solution and information-society area. Estonia therefore perceives the presidency as an “opportunity for us [Estonia] to share experience and further develop the issues at the European level” (Action Plan 2015, 11), hence using this as a power resource to strengthen the Estonian reputation and thereby its possibilities to become a directional or unilateral leader in policy-making regarding the digital market.

4.3. Relationship with the Commission

Literature on small states indicates that small member states approach the Commission differently to the larger member states. The small states have “... traditionally relied on the Commission when seeking influence in the EU, because it is perceived as an independent, technocratic and supranational counterweight to the power politics of the Council” (Howard Grøn and Wivel 2011, 525). Small states are also said to consider the Commission to be their guardian and often form a closer relationship with the Commission than the larger member states (Danish official, April 2016; also Thorhallsson 2006a; Geurts 1998, see also Magnúsdóttir 2010 and Bunse et al. 2005). This is indeed a quite common perception among small member states, “... where the Commission is often considered an indispensable counter-weight to the predominance of large states in the EU supranational system” (Geurts 1998, 49). Magnúsdóttir (2010) claims that the close relationship with the Commission can be seen as a cognitive power resource, which small states can use at every stage. Therefore, a good cooperation between the Commission and the incumbent state is an important factor among leadership qualities and can determine the success of the presidency (Kirchner 1992).

Denmark has certainly had an intimate relationship with the Commission, which was also acknowledged by a Danish official (April 2016). Its good cooperation was used in the Danish Presidency in 2012 and was an essential factor in tilting the agenda in favour of the Danes. Latvia realised, thanks to its presidency, how important it is to have a good relationship with the Commission and to initiate a dialogue during the early stages of the legislation formation in order to build up influence (Latvian official, April 2016). Estonia, too, has acknowledged the importance of a good cooperation with the Commission (Estonian official A, March 2016). However, it can be argued that the relatively short membership of the Eastern European states is an obstacle and that they need more time to establish a close relationship with the Commission in order to use it fully as a power resource. This is supported by a Danish official (April 2016), who claimed that it is, in fact, their long membership status and extensive experience in Council presidencies that has helped to form such a close relationship with the Commission. A good example supporting this statement is perhaps the fact that Denmark started a dialogue with the Commission several years before their presidency in order to have the desired legislative proposal on the agenda during their term (Danish official, April 2016), whereas the Latvian official (April 2016) claims that Latvia’s cooperation with the Commission started, in contrast, only approximately one year prior to their presidency.

On the other hand, it should be noted that Finland engaged in a similar strategy

(using the close relations with the Commission to its advantage) when preparing for its first presidency term in 1999, only four years after Finland joined the EU. Finland, sharing historical similarities with Estonia, was eager to distance itself from Russia and portray itself as a committed European. Finland had already approached the Commission in 1994, before it became an EU member, looking for support concerning problems stemming from Russia, such as increasing water pollution in Finnish frontier regions, threats of nuclear reactor accidents, increased drug trafficking and organised crimes originating in Russia (“The Northern Dimension Project”; see also Tallberg 2006; Magnúsdóttir 2010). Finland worked adamantly at building up a close relationship with the Commission in its early years in order to secure the support of the Commission when Finland eventually presented its so-called Northern Dimension proposal in 1997. Finland aimed to get the Northern Dimension Project (NDP) accepted during its presidency term in 1999 and had carefully been able to frame the project as a European project, despite some resistance from the Mediterranean member states. Finland worked closely with the Commission during its presidency term on pushing the NDP forward, and the result was that NDP was accepted less than six months after the Finnish presidency (Magnúsdóttir 2010).

Furthermore, Andrus Ansip, an Estonian who is one of the vice presidents in the Juncker Commission, is responsible for the digital single market within the EU. This creates an opportunity for the Estonian presidency to tactfully cooperate with the Commission, both in the pre-presidency term and when at the helm of the presidency, in order to shape the agenda and promote Estonian interests with the support of the Commission (Magnúsdóttir and Thorhallsson 2011; Panke 2010, 2011). Andersen and Liefferink (1997), as well as Lindholm (2002), have pointed out several ways or methods for the member states to strengthen the relationship with the Commission in order to increase their influence. Firstly, there is the strategic employment of national experts in the Commission’s Directorate-Generals, where the state in question holds a strong interest, such as Estonian experts on the digital market. Respectively, a small state that wants to strengthen its relationship with the Commission can offer its national officials to the Commission and then maintain a close liaison with its national officials during the presidency term. Also important is the example-setting influence that Estonia might have when it comes to digital solutions. Accordingly, Estonia can strengthen its relationship with the Commission and try to direct the Commission’s ideas or legislative proposals onto a path favourable to Estonia by drawing the attention of the Commission to national examples and expertise in the digital market. It is a well-known fact that the Commission often examines national legislation from the member states in order to find a suitable “template” to use as a guide when drafting new legislative proposals on an EU level.

4.4. Approach to the Presidency and National Interests

However, the Action Plan (2015, 7) also states that the most important goal for Estonia is “to be a good pilot, whose goal is to guide and direct operation of the Council and legislative process of the EU as efficiently as possible, developing consensus and acting as an honest broker”. With this in mind, Estonia appears to lean more towards silencing its national interests rather than perceiving the presidency term as

a forum for amplifying Estonian values. Here it is important to know what are considered to be Estonian national interests and what common European ones are. In this study, Estonian interests are defined as outlined by government officials in our interviews and in the key presidency documents.

Firstly, the importance of unity and the strength of the EU is highly emphasised as the EU is considered to be the main security provider for Estonia along with NATO, and security concerns are a priority for Estonia (Coalition Agreement 2016, EUPOL 2015, Estonian officials A, March 2016 and B, April 2017). In addition, due to current world events and changes in the US administration and politics, transatlantic relations are important for Estonia as NATO's role in providing security to small and geographically vulnerable states is essential (Estonian official B, April 2017). However, the development of transatlantic cooperation is only briefly mentioned in the EUPOL document as well as the Coalition Agreement. Also, it is entirely missing from the presidency preparation documents and is still not highlighted in the presidency priorities, which can be considered one of the interests silenced by Estonians and thus supports the neutral and mediating position Estonia is likely to take. Additionally, one could interpret that as a conscious move not to be portrayed as self-interest driven and overly ambitious, which, according to Estonian officials, would be a disaster (Estonian officials A, March 2016 and B, April 2017). On the other hand, this can also be a smart strategic move to frame a national interest as a common European one, as Estonians are likely to promote the security-budget increase among member states.

Furthermore, and also strongly connected to security, the importance of successful and integrated Eastern Partnership is emphasised throughout the key documents (Action Plan 2015; Coalition Agreement 2016; EUPOL 2015). The stable and cooperative Eastern neighbourhood is essential to Estonia, which shares the historical and geographical disadvantages to threats from Russia and not a surprising interest considering the current geopolitical landscape (Estonian official B, April 2017).

Less connected to the security concept and more to the concept of Estonia's image and expertise is the promotion of e-solutions (Estonian official B, April 2017; EUPOL 2015). Interestingly, although the advancement of a digital market is mentioned in several documents and integrated to the current presidency priorities, it was not clearly defined as an Estonian interest in the Action Plan (2015, 10-11) but rather only as their strength. Nevertheless, the digital market and free movement of data is now one of the four key priorities for the Estonian presidency and is likely to be emphasised during their term. Finally, the importance of a functioning Single Market is essential to a small state such as Estonia, which relies on exports and access to other member states' markets in order to boost its economy (Estonian officials B, April 2017 and C, April 2017; Action Plan 2015).

As to European common interests, our starting point is the Commission's list of ten priorities, which to a large extent are aligned with the Estonian priorities, naming, among other things, the Digital Single Market and the Internal Market as well as the focus on security (Juncker 2014). Also, the challenges facing the union are taken into consideration. Therefore, it is clear that Estonian interests overlap with the European ones to a large extent, as also acknowledged by the Estonian officials (Estonian officials A, March 2016, B, April 2017, and C, April 2017). Nevertheless, to what extent

Estonians will actively pursue and focus on their preferred policy areas is the key to our study, and our expectations are that the national interest areas will be silenced, meaning limited, in order to showcase Estonia as a good mediator and pro-European member state.

Nevertheless, it is claimed in the Action Plan (2015, 10) that the presidency agenda will be constructed by first and foremost prioritising “what is relevant to, and important for, Europe at this time”. This is in line with how several other small member states have approached their presidency term, as they have deemed the long-term effects of running a successful presidency more important than a strong emphasis on the promotion of national interests (Estonian and Latvian officials, March and April 2016). Finland shares several similarities with Estonia within the EU, originating from the common Russian neighbour, a limited scope of action during the Cold War and a will to strengthen its European identity (Magnúsdóttir 2010). The first Finnish Council presidency in 1999 was perceived as a very successful presidency, characterised by a somewhat self-sacrificing, problem-solving leadership.

The Finnish leadership style was defined by practicality and a will to compromise, although Finland was able to push important Finnish issues higher on the Council agenda with its strategic framing and detailed preparations, most notably Finland’s initiative, the NDP, launched right after the Finnish presidency term in 2000 (Magnúsdóttir 2010; Arter 2000). The Finnish presidency aimed at enhancing its image as a good European and distancing itself from Russia. A Finnish official explained their will to silence national interests during their term by stating that “... getting results was what made the presidency successful, not sticking too hard to one’s principles” (Finnish official, February 2009). “Getting things done” and “delivering results” was also how the Estonian official defined a successful presidency (Estonian official A, March 2016).

The upcoming Estonian presidency appears to already have adopted a line similar to the aforementioned Finnish presidency. When asked whether or not Estonia would pursue its national interests during the presidency, Estonian officials gave answers such as: “Forget about it!” (Estonian official A, March 2016). However, Estonian official also argued that Estonia’s interests intertwine to some extent with the interests of the EU. Thus, Estonian national interests will be brought to attention automatically. The main standpoint is, however, expressed by an Estonian official (March 2016): “We certainly learned through the 10 years of membership that it [the agenda] is always the European interests, not the national interests”. Interviews with Estonian officials also revealed that Estonia’s strategy appears to be characterised by similar practicality and consensus-oriented problem-solving leadership as the first Finnish presidency, where efficiency and mediation instead of agenda-setting are key terms.

The upcoming Estonian presidency appears to define a successful presidency as a presidency that is an efficient honest broker rather than a promoter of national interests. An Estonian official explains this by saying that if Estonia was perceived as a blunt promoter of national interests, this would be “the biggest disaster” that the presidency could experience (Estonian official A, March 2016). However, Estonian officials also mention that the presidency term entails an opportunity to raise issues that are of national interest. One example mentioned is Denmark’s and Sweden’s

promotion of their “flexicurity”³ concept during their presidency terms, which was later adopted by several other European countries (Estonian official A, March 2016). An Estonian official explained that sometimes, when the best of a state’s national achievements are amplified during the presidency, they are acknowledged and might be adopted; but if you bring national failures to the table, they could have a negative effect on the state’s reputation. As mentioned before, Estonia is expected to promote digital achievements, but since it is likely that the Estonian concept of e-governance might not work everywhere, it is safer not to place too much emphasis on it (Estonian official A, March 2016).

5. Conclusion

The presidency offers incumbent states a unique opportunity to be at the centre of the EU’s decision-making for a limited time period. This position is especially important for the small member states, and therefore they need to determine how they approach the presidency: do they aim at exercising a directional or even unilateral leadership during their presidency term, amplifying their national interests; or do they aim at acting as problem-solving leaders or even neutral honest brokers ready to silence their interests in favour of the European common good?

The first results of our study support our main claim and indicate that Estonia is likely to exercise a problem-solving and mediating leadership, focusing on establishing its image and identity as a pro-European member state – a reputation that can have positive long-term consequences in future negotiations after Estonia finishes its presidency term. Other newcomers have shown similar tendencies, which for example were visible during Finland’s and Latvia’s first presidencies, as discussed in our analysis (Magnusdottir 2010; Latvian and Finnish officials, March 2016, February 2006).

Our interviews with Latvian, Finnish, and Estonian officials also indicate that first-time presidencies should (or are likely to) avoid risk-taking behaviour and overly ambitious goals, and the text analysis of the Estonian presidency documents confirms this cautious, pragmatic approach that Estonia is likely to take. If the Estonian presidency is successful in its image establishment during its term, Estonia’s pro-European image will likely benefit the incumbent even after the presidency term has ended. Good-will and reputations gained from a successfully held office will then most likely outweigh possible compromises or sacrifices of national interests made during the presidency term.

Some national interests can still be pursued using different power resources available to small states, such as expertise and knowledge in certain areas (Magnusdottir 2010; Thorhallsson 2000; Bunse 2009). This power resource has been used extensively by the Scandinavian member states in their presidency terms but will also be useful to Estonia, which has a unique advantage in the digital mar-

³ “Flexicurity is an integrated strategy for enhancing, at the same time, flexibility and security in the labour market. It attempts to reconcile employers’ need for a flexible workforce with workers’ need for security – confidence that they will not face long periods of unemployment” (read more about it at the European Commission webpage: <http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=102>).

ket area. Bearing in mind the important ally that Estonia possesses in the Commission, through the Estonian Digital Market Vice President, Estonia should be able to emphasise the e-solutions' importance and frame it further as of common European interest.

Furthermore, the presidency office represents several opportunities for Estonia, first and foremost in regard to the public administration, for example via policy-learning and knowledge exchange, as well as a unique administrative experience, which will benefit the Estonian civil service even after the presidency. A professional and transparent civil service, coupled with extensive coordination capacity and flexibility stemming from the smallness of the administration, are important size-related factors for Estonia. An efficient national administration, with aforementioned characteristics can be later used as a cognitive power resource facilitating future negotiations and policy-shaping within the EU (Randma-Liiv 2002).

The results of our interviews also indicate that the small state presidencies can compensate for their shortcomings in administrative capacities and experiences by building a close relationship with the Commission whom they consider to be a close ally within the EU's framework (Finnish official, February 2008; Latvian official, March 2016; Estonian official A, March 2016; see also Magnúsdóttir 2010). Good relations with the Commission are thus considered imperative when promoting national concerns and a necessary institutional support when running the Council presidency. Furthermore, in order to be portrayed as a pro-European member state, having an ally in one of the key institutions of the Union is essential.

Moreover, it can be argued that the role and the importance of the office of the presidency have changed with the Lisbon Treaty. Nevertheless, further research on post-Lisbon presidencies and a comparison with pre-Lisbon presidencies is needed in order to shed light on how small states could approach the Council presidency. In addition, further research on the public administrative challenges of small state presidencies is also warranted as the adaptation of the civil service to a Council presidency term, as well as the opportunities for innovation and knowledge exchange, are key factors for a successful small state Council presidency.

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JANA BENDEL is student of Europeans Affairs, a Master of Science programme at Lund University. Throughout her studies at university, she has expressed her interest in the balance of power within the EU in general and the role of the small EU member states in particular. In this context, she has written a bachelor’s thesis about small EU member states at the helm of the Council presidency, which in turn has inspired the writing of this article. In 2017, she will closely follow Estonia’s first Council presidency, with the intent to carry out further research in this field. Email: jana.bendel2@gmail.com

DR. GUNNHILDUR LILY MAGNUSDOTTIR is senior lecturer of political science and head of the international relations programme at the Department of Global Political Studies at Malmö University. She has been teaching extensively in the fields of European studies, international relations, environmental politics and public administration. Her latest research focuses on immigrant representation in the Swedish parliament, on gender recognition in climate policy-making in Scandinavia and within the Commission of the EU. Magnúsdóttir’s research also focuses on small states in the EU and the Scandinavian EU member states’ power resources within the EU. Correspondence: Gunnhildur Lily Magnúsdóttir, Department of Global Political Studies, Malmö University, 205 06 Malmö; Email: gunnhildur.lily.magnusdottir@mah.se