



ACTA HISTRIAE

32, 2024, 3



UDK/UDC 94(05)

ISSN 1318-0185
e-ISSN 2591-1767



Zgodovinsko društvo za južno Primorsko - Koper
Società storica del Litorale - Capodistria

ACTA HISTRIAE

32, 2024, 3

KOPER 2024

ISSN 1318-0185
e-ISSN 2591-1767

UDK/UDC 94(05)

Letnik 32, leto 2024, številka 3

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Published by:

Zgodovinsko društvo za južno Primorsko - Koper / Società storica del Litorale - Capodistria® / Institut IRRIS za raziskave, razvoj in strategije družbe, kulture in okolja / Institute IRRIS for Research, Development and Strategies of Society, Culture and Environment / Istituto IRRIS di ricerca, sviluppo e strategie della società, cultura e ambiente®

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Tisk/Stampa/Print:

Založništvo PADRE d.o.o.

Naklada/Tiratura/Copies:

300 izvodov/copie/copies

Finančna podpora/

Supporto finanziario/

Financially supported by:

Javna agencija za znanstvenoraziskovalno in inovacijsko dejavnost Republike Slovenije / Slovenian Research and Innovation Agency

Slika na naslovnici/

Foto di copertina/

Picture on the cover:

Ministrska predsednika Jadranka Kosor in Borut Pahor leta 2010 / I primi ministri Jadranka Kosor e Borut Pahor nel 2010 / Prime ministers Jadranka Kosor and Borut Pahor in 2010 (foto/photo: Stanko Gruden, STA, Wikimedia Commons).

Redakcija te številke je bila zaključena 30. septembra 2024.

Revija Acta Histriae je vključena v naslednje podatkovne baze / Gli articoli pubblicati in questa rivista sono inclusi nei seguenti indici di citazione / Articles appearing in this journal are abstracted and indexed in: CLARIVATE ANALYTICS (USA): Social Sciences Citation Index (SSCI), Social Scisearch, Arts and Humanities Citation Index (A&HCI), Journal Citation Reports / Social Sciences Edition (USA); IBZ, Internationale Bibliographie der Zeitschriftenliteratur (GER); International Bibliography of the Social Sciences (IBSS) (UK); Referativnyi Zhurnal Viniti (RUS); European Reference Index for the Humanities and Social Sciences (ERIH PLUS); Elsevier B. V.: SCOPUS (NL); DOAJ.

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SLOVENIA'S FIRST AND SECOND EU COUNCIL PRESIDENCY: LESSONS LEARNT TO ENHANCE THE BENEFITS OF EU MEMBERSHIP

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ABSTRACT

By comparing Slovenia's Presidency of the Council of the European Union (EU) in 2008 and 2021 the article aims to provide lessons learnt and suggestions for enhancing the benefits of EU membership in the future. We first analyse the two very different institutional, geo-political and geo-economic contexts during which Slovenia conducted its Presidency stints, before analysing how the changed context reflected on Slovenia's preparation, organization, the objectives and the achievements of the Presidency. The comparison of both Presidencies demonstrates fundamental changes in the country's relationship to the EU and limitations of the 'Presidency effect' for times of 'ordinary' membership.

Keywords: Slovenia, rotating Presidency, European Union, small states, achievements, context

PRIMA E SECONDA PRESIDENZA SLOVENA DEL CONSIGLIO DELL'UE: LEZIONI APPRESE PER MIGLIORARE I VANTAGGI DELL'ADESIONE ALL'UE

SINTESI

Confrontando le Presidenze slovene del Consiglio dell'Unione Europea (UE) nel 2008 e nel 2021, l'articolo si propone di indicare le lezioni apprese e proporre dei suggerimenti per migliorare i benefici dell'appartenenza all'UE in futuro. Iniziamo analizzando i due contesti istituzionali, geopolitici e geoeconomici molto diversi in cui la Slovenia ha svolto i suoi mandati di Presidenza, per poi esaminare come il contesto mutato si sia riflesso sulla preparazione, l'organizzazione, gli obiettivi e i risultati della Presidenza slovena. Il confronto tra le due Presidenze evidenzia cambiamenti fondamentali nel rapporto del paese con l'UE e i limiti dell' 'effetto Presidenza' nei periodi di appartenenza 'ordinaria'.

Parole chiave: Slovenia, Presidenza a rotazione, Unione Europea, stati piccoli, risultati, contesto

INTRODUCTION

In 2024, the European Union (EU) celebrated 20 years since the ‘Big Bang’ enlargement of 2004. Simultaneously, Slovenia – along with nine other member states – celebrated 20 years of membership in a club it did not shape from the start.¹ In fact, it was quite the opposite, as the EU had placed significant conditions on aspiring members that they had to fulfil prior to joining. Since joining the EU, Slovenia – just like all the other member states – has been enjoying equal rights and carrying out the duties of a member state. The country’s capacity to pursue its interests and co-shape the EU, like those of other member states, are not given. They are strongly correlated with the competences of its political elite and public administration.

Slovenia’s two turns undertaking the rotating Presidency of the Council of the European Union (hereafter: the Presidency) took place in remarkably different institutional, political and economic circumstances, which affected the tasks, objectives and ‘what it took’ to execute the Presidency. The first Presidency came early into Slovenia’s membership of the EU in 2008. The country was the first among those countries that joined the Union in 2004, at a time when it was still under the conditions of the Treaty of Nice. Slovenia proved that it was more than capable of managing such a difficult task (Kajnc, 2008; 2009; Svetličič & Cerjak, 2015, 6). The second Presidency took place after years of having gradually developed the skills required to successfully navigate the EU and having learned from painful lessons in the process (Svetličič, 2024, 110).

In this article, the authors compare Slovenia’s turns holding the Presidency in 2008 and 2021, as well as the changes in the country’s preparation, organisation, objective-setting and achievements of both its Presidencies. It contextualises them against the institutional, economic and political context in which the two Presidencies took place. Finally, the authors reflect on what the differences in approach to the two turns of holding the Presidency mean for Slovenia’s membership of the EU following the Presidencies. The aim of this article is to examine the changes in attitudes of Slovenia’s political elites and public administration to the role of the Presidency and how the major differences in the contexts affected the required adjustments, reshaping of the agenda and general performance of the two Presidencies. Finally, the goal was to determine the impact of the changes observed between 2008 and 2021 for Slovenia’s EU membership. The article begins with an explanation of why studying the Presidency in the four dimensions of preparation, organisation, objective-setting and achievements can help conclusions to be drawn in terms of the

1 This article is part of the programme financially supported by the Slovenian Research and Innovation Agency (research core funding No. P5-0177). Sabina Lange’s research has been supported by Public Scholarship, Development, Disability and Maintenance Fund of the Republic of Slovenia (Under the ‘Ad futura’ call contract No. 11013-17/2023). Authors would like to thank the Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of the Republic of Slovenia (then Ministry of Foreign Affairs) for its cooperation and support in disseminating the surveys among the ‘Presidency actors’. We would also like to thank the two anonymous reviewers for their comments on an earlier draft of this article.

attitudes of Slovenia's political and civil servants to EU membership. A comparison follows of the two very different contexts in which both Presidencies took place. In the third part, the authors compare the preparation, organisation, objectives and main achievements of the two Presidencies. In the final discussion, conclusions are drawn about what these findings mean for the future of Slovenia's EU membership.

HOLDING THE EU PRESIDENCY AND 'ORDINARY' EU MEMBERSHIP

The rotating Presidency is a mechanism to equalise the power differences between the EU's small and big member states (Bunse, 2009, 5). Despite their differences, which result in different capacities, the role of holding the Presidency is the same for all member states. Following a member state's six-month turn in office, it returns to being an 'ordinary' member state. In a Union of 27 members, any two turns at holding a Presidency are 13.5 years apart, thus making the 'ordinary' membership period the only reality for a considerable length of time. The Presidency, meanwhile, offers member states a particular advantage that exceeds its short term in office (Bunse, 2009; Haughton, 2010). A member state's influence is greater during its time at the helm (Thomson, 2008; Warntjen, 2008) and can be extrapolated for later 'ordinary' membership. Rotating presidencies are a 'window of opportunity, bringing Europe closer to citizens' everyday political life' (Eisele, 2022, 343), making EU issues more visible and relevant in the public domain.

This is particularly the case for small member states, as the dual role of managing the Presidency and 'ordinary' membership requires sustained attention by its politicians. It also demonstrates the strengths and weaknesses of diplomacy and public administration in general. As a member state, the country holding the Presidency continues to implement EU laws and policies at home. It also continues to be represented as member state in the Council and retains its voting power. On average, it takes about three years to formulate and adopt laws in the EU.² The six-month stint as Presidency is only part of this process. Irrespective of which stage of the process a country's Presidency takes place, in the other stages of the process a member state is in a position to formulate its preferences and represent its national interests on a given dossier. Careful management of staff and Presidency-related knowledge and experience renders the country better equipped for the latter (Svetličič & Cerjak, 2015, 16).

Since the early days of academic literature on the role of the rotating Presidency (e.g. Wallace & Edwards, 1976; Elgström, 2003; cf. Vysotskaya Guedes Vieira & Kajnc Lange, 2011), it was considered that the rotating Presidency undertakes the following tasks: management of the Council and liaison with other Union

2 Law is used as a generic term for legally binding legislative Union acts. Of the average of three years, roughly half of this time is taken up by the Commission's process of formulating a policy and the other half by the decision-making procedure.

institutions,³ provider of political initiatives, package-broker and external representative – initially of the member states of the European Economic Community and, following the entry into force of the Treaty of Maastricht, of the members of the European Union.

Several institutional innovations of the Treaty of Lisbon (1 December 2009) affected the nature and tasks of the rotating Presidency (Kajnč & Geyer, 2011; Van Hecke & Bursens, 2011; Koči & Antal, 2024). The introduction of ‘external actors of the Union’⁴ and extension of the powers of the European Parliament changed the gravitas of the rotating Presidency – from managing the agenda and the member states in the European Council and the Council and representing the EU externally pre-Lisbon to legislative negotiations in the Council and effective representation of the Council in negotiations with the European Parliament.⁵ The introduction of a full time President of the European Council (POTEC) also reduced the political role of the Presidency.

Many of the tasks of the rotating Presidency are unique to the position of the Presidency. Chairing meetings in the Council and aiming to bring about a compromise differs from representing a national position. It requires more time because there are many more actors with whom to engage, expertise on policy matters to be deployed, and drafting sessions to count on. Though member states’ Permanent Representations follow the work of the European Parliament (Perarnaud, 2022), the Presidency, representing the Council, *de facto* negotiates on legislation with parliamentary delegations, creating a unique situation in which national diplomats negotiate directly with elected politicians.⁶ Making the Presidency’s political initiative a success requires a carefully crafted and timely executed campaign, whereas a representation of national position resembles more work in multilateral diplomacy and is a response to an invitation to do so in meetings scheduled by the Presidency.

Though there are several distinctive features of membership and the Presidency, they are also qualitatively related. Presidency builds on the knowledge and competences that a member state acquires and applies during the ‘ordinary’ times of its membership (Kajnč & Svetličič, 2010, 85). Several of the competences required for the Presidency to exercise its role may also be beneficial for ‘ordinary’ membership.

3 The management and liaison functions are Treaty-based functions, typologies also sometimes (e.g. by Elgström, 2003) as administrative and coordinating functions.

4 President of the European Council (POTEC), High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (HRUFASP) and the Commission are explicitly given tasks of external representation of the Union (Art. 15 (6), 17 (1) and 27 (2) of the Treaty on European Union).

5 For the analysis of relations between the Presidency and the European Parliament, cf. Sierens and Vandenbussche (2024).

6 Ministers may occasionally lead a Presidency delegation in dialogue negotiations, however, it is practice for the Council delegation to be led by the (deputy) Permanent Representative (Brandsma, 2015; Brandsma et al., 2020).

Table 1: Distinctive characteristics of membership and the roles and nature of the Presidency (The authors' own analysis).

	Role	Nature
Ordinary membership	<i>Representation of national interests in the Council</i> <i>Informal links to other institutions</i> <i>Taking part in coordination of external representation of the Union</i> <i>Preparation of national positions</i> <i>Implementation of EU laws</i>	<i>Focus on the Council</i> <i>Reactive</i> <i>Participatory</i> <i>Gravitas on preparation, coordination and implementation at home</i>
Presidency	<i>Managing the work of the Council and driving its work forward by finding compromises</i> <i>Liaison and de facto negotiator with other institutions</i> <i>Source of political initiative</i> <i>Taking part in coordination of external representation of the Union and representing member states externally when so agreed</i> <i>Preparation of roadmaps and national positions</i>	<i>Focus on the Council, special attention paid to the Commission and the EP</i> <i>Honest broker</i> <i>Organisation and coordination</i> <i>Leader</i> <i>Gravitas on management and negotiation in Brussels</i>

Member states experience a different Presidency every six months, giving them a chance to build on best practices. In pursuit of their national interest, member states listen to other member states and other actors, reporting home on the positions of others and the direction of the negotiations. Subsequently, they actively seek out coalitions to support each other in meetings and present joint proposals. Groups of member states submit their own (political) initiatives, usually in a non-paper form.

New knowledge, networks and skills acquired through the Presidency, as well as issues and processes, serve to represent national interests in the period following a Presidency as stakeholder positions are known or it is easier to determine them, coalitions are built faster, and compromise suggestions are crafted more easily (Grumbinaitė, 2023). The effects of the Presidency also go beyond public administration into the realm of politics. Haughton (2010) confirms that there was an important domestic 'Presidency effect' in the case of the first Presidencies of Slovenia (2008) and Czechia (2009), since both countries took the preparations very seriously. The profile of EU politics was raised, institutional change led to a reinforcement of the EU-related capacity of the state and some mildly Eurosceptic politicians embraced more positive positions.

Finally, as we examine the two Presidencies and how Slovenia adapted to the changed role in each of them in view of what they mean for the 'ordinary' membership, we look

at the four dimensions of preparation, organisation, objective-setting and achievements. We chose these dimensions in function of the attitude of the government towards the Presidency. Which resources and what kind of political will can be discerned from the analysis of preparation? What kind of an understanding of the EU as a political system is mirrored in the organisation of the Presidency? Ambition, direction, nature and priorities can be dissected from the analysis of the objectives the Presidency sets for itself. What has been considered as achievements of the Presidency, and by who, is considered in order to further elucidate the relationship between the country and the EU.

(GEO) ECONOMIC, (GEO) POLITICAL AND INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXTS IN 2008 AND 2021

Slovenia's two turns of holding the Presidency took place in very different institutional, political and economic contexts at national, European and global levels, all of which affected the preparation, organisation, objectives and achievements of the country's two turns.⁷

Slovenia's first turn at holding the rotating Presidency in 2008 took place prior to the 2009–2012 financial and economic crisis, and prior to the 2008 Russian-Georgian war, which first shook the post-World War II European security architecture.

What followed at the global level has been named 'the age of unpeace' (Mark Leonard), 'the age of revolutions' (Fareed Zakaria), and 'the age of artificial intelligence' (Henry Kissinger, Eric Schmidt, Daniel Huttenlocher), to name just a few attempts to characterise the changes.⁸ The negative consequences of globalisation and financialisation exposed following the 2008 financial crisis demonstrated how old recipes (back to the *old normal*) could not address the real causes of (poly) crises. The COVID-19 crisis revealed the inadequacy of the existing anthropocentric development models. Technological advancements, digital transformation and artificial intelligence are transforming societies. Climate change and environmental degradation started to be discussed as matters of international security.

In Europe specifically, the period following the first Slovenian Presidency was marked by what some labelled 'the age of permacrisis' (Zuleeg, Emmanouilidis & Borges de Castro, 2021). It started with the 2008 financial crisis, evolving into the sovereign-debt crisis and the Eurozone crisis, followed by the migration wave in 2015, securitisation of the Western Balkans (Osland & Peter, 2021) and the existential crisis of Brexit becoming a reality following the June 2016 referendum.

⁷ A comprehensive analysis of these factors and their break down is in Koči and Antal (2024). They examine how these factors impact the success of the Presidency in exercising its different roles. We, in turn, look at how they affected the different roles of the Presidency.

⁸ Garton Ash (2024) offers a compilation of such characterisations, demonstrating how looking into the past helps us understand our present reality.

After a short respite, the COVID-19 pandemic, Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and the energy crisis marked the ninth legislative period in the EU between 2019 and 2024, with the latter two following Slovenia's 2021 Presidency. An extraordinary political will, resources, mechanisms and tools were amassed in the EU to manage these crises. As member states pooled resources, the balance of power in the EU shifted towards the European Council and the Council.

These changes transformed EU politics (Dawson, 2015). They most notably exposed the importance of crisis management, pooling of resources, and joint and coordinated responses in the EU (Ladi & Polverari, 2024). They also affected political agendas, with complex policy clusters, such as digital transformation, the 'Green Deal' and 'promoting the European way of life' finding themselves among the European Commission's 2019–2024 priorities, while management of the COVID-19 and the 2022 energy crises abruptly entered the agenda.

The rotating Presidency's manoeuvring space to manage the work in the Council was diminished by the larger parts of the agenda being determined by crisis management measures. Its brokerage role suffered from the increasing role of the European Council (Schramm & Wessels, 2023) and from the need for faster decision-making, which did not always allow time to exhaust negotiations to find a consensus or to ensure technically and politically optimal decisions.⁹

Finally, with the entry into force of the Treaty of Lisbon on 1 December 2009, the EU itself underwent major institutional changes, including changes to the role of the rotating Presidency. In terms of management of the Council, it introduced two new actors: the President of the European Council (POTEC) and the High representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, who is also vice President of the Commission (HRVP), who each in turn took over the chairmanship of the European Council and the Foreign Affairs Council. This leaves the Presidency in charge of the organisation of the work of the remaining nine Council formation. Alongside the European Commission, the POTEC and the HRVP also undertake the role of 'external actor' of the Union, thus taking over the external representational tasks from the rotating Presidency.¹⁰ With the POTEC taking over the chairmanship of the European Council, the power of political initiative – previously exercised by the Presidency's control of the European Council agenda – has diminished (Eisele et al., 2023, 328). The role of a package-broker, meanwhile, was to be transformed, in particular by two new sets of norms in the Treaty of Lisbon. First, by a general change from decision-making by unanimity

9 The duration of the ordinary legislative procedure time in the first half of the ninth parliamentary term (1 July 2019–31 December 2021) needed to forge a consensus fell by four months to 12 months in comparison to the same period five years earlier. However, the difference is due to the files adopted via simplified or urgency procedures, rather than being due to the general acceleration of decision-making on non-urgent files (European Parliament, 2021).

10 Other states may still ask the country holding the rotating Presidency to represent them externally in cases when the subject matter falls outside of the Union competences. HRVP may also arrange for them to be represented by the rotating Presidency, for example in bilateral dialogues.

to decision-making by a qualified majority vote in the Council. Second, by the expansion of a scope of the application of the ordinary legislative procedure, thus requiring the rotating Presidency to act in many more cases of legislative negotiations as the *de facto* negotiator on behalf of the Council in the trilogue meetings between the European Parliament, the Commission and the Council, eventually also boosting its brokerage role beyond the confines of the Council.

This means that the job of the rotating Presidency drifted away from the foreign policy themes and diplomats. Instead, parts of the national administration in charge of organising and coordinating the Presidency's efforts (often based in the foreign ministry or in a government office directly attached to the President or Prime Minister of the country), as well as sectoral ministries negotiating complex legislative dossiers, came to the fore. The Presidency had to take the high dynamics of crisis management into account, as it had to face a presidential Commission,¹¹ working more closely with the European Council.¹² The agenda structuring powers of the Presidency gave way to crisis-conditioned dynamics (Coman & Sierens, 2024). Initially it slowed-down legislative decision-making following the introduction of the Treaty of Lisbon, but sped up as COVID-19, Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and the energy crisis demanded quick responses. Dissenting voices and negative votes in the Council showed the pressure efficiency places upon unity.¹³ In-depth expert knowledge on concrete legislative proposals in sectoral policies, understanding partners' negotiating positions, crafting of negotiating strategies and executing them in the Council and in trilogues were demanded of officials in sectoral ministries and their colleagues based in the Permanent Representations. Informal meetings¹⁴ at various levels sought to forge a shared understanding of common and topical issues (unlike the previous practice of placing issues of national interest on the agenda of informal meetings as the Presidency sought to Europeanise them, present them as common EU interests because 'they are in fact two sides of the same coin' (Udovič & Svetličič, 2018, 7)). These shifts increased the importance of operational and relational skills.

11 The Treaty of Lisbon increased the powers of the President of the Commission. In contrast to previous Commission Presidents trying to avoid politics, Jean-Claude Juncker declared his Commission (2014–2019) as a political one and Ursula von der Leyen declared hers (2019–2024) as a geo-political one.

12 The President of the Commission is a member of the European Council. The frequency of European Council meetings has increased in the period since 2010 and peaked at 16 meetings in a single year (authors' own calculation based on data on the Council website). Bilateral meetings between the Commission President and national leaders have also become very common.

13 This is most notably visible in the area of Common Foreign and Security Policy, where unanimity is the norm. The use of veto power led to the establishment of a Group of Friends, led by Germany, in support of qualified majority voting (Federal Foreign Office, 2023).

14 The number of informal Council meetings per Presidency rose from the average of 14 in the years prior to 2010 to just over 20 in the last ninth legislative period (2019–2023) – (authors' own calculation based on the Council's website).

A COMPARISON OF THE PREPARATION, ORGANISATION, OBJECTIVES AND ACHIEVEMENTS OF THE 2008 AND 2021 PRESIDENCIES

Preparation and organisation

Slovenia's preparations for its first Presidency were marked by its wish to reaffirm its status as the 'star pupil' (Klemenčič, 2007, 12). Preparations ran smoothly from early 2005 onwards, resulting in a broadly agreed well organised and well executed Presidency (Kajnc, 2009).

This was partly the result of an internal political consensus based on a 'non-attack pact' signed by all but two parliamentary political parties.¹⁵ Preparations for the 2021 Presidency built on best practices of the 2008 Presidency. They started as early as in 2017 under the centre-left government of Miro Cerar (Government of the Republic of Slovenia, 2019) and continued after the 2018 Parliamentary elections under the centre-left minority government led by Marjan Šarec (2018–2020). The fall of the government in early 2020 interrupted preparations for the 2021 Presidency. The new centre-right government of the three-time Prime Minister Janez Janša (2020–2022) changed the course of preparations.

Consequently, the second Slovenian Presidency was marked by political volatility and civil society protests against the government that took over at the start of the pandemic in March 2020. Though lead by the same Prime Minister (Janez Janša) as during the first Presidency, the opposition refused to enter a similar 'non-attack' arrangement, viewing foreign and European policies as being instrumentalised for domestic consolidation of power, and turning away from the more liberal centre of the EU (Bojinović Fenko & Svetličič, 2022), while also eroding democracy and with it Slovenia's reputation in the EU and in the world.¹⁶ These internal developments demanded extra effort from the Presidency actors to demonstrate their commitment to the Presidency and EU ideals,¹⁷ This was also confirmed in our survey, where 34.6% of respondents in 2021 compared to 26.1% in 2008 agreed that domestic political issues strongly influenced the Presidency.¹⁸

15 Signed on 17 May 2007 this was 'Agreement on the Co-operation of Political Parties, the Group of Unconnected Deputies and Representatives of National Minorities in the National Assembly of the Republic of Slovenia for the Successful Implementation of the Preparation and Presidency of the EU'. It is arguable whether or not the agreement held firm throughout the entire term of the Presidency, with presidential elections on the way and parliamentary elections following closely thereafter (cf. Fink-Hafner & Lajh, 2008). In 2021, all but one opposition party refused to enter such an arrangement (Fink-Hafner, 2022).

16 Freedom House's (2022) report 'Nations in Transit' assessed Slovenia as a country that 'saw sharpest democratic decline in Eastern Europe, Central Asia in 2021'.

17 A good illustration of this is the article published by Politico Europe on the first day of Slovenia's 2021 Presidency, titled 'A Call for Vigilance as Slovenia's EU Presidency Begins' (Buyon, 2021).

18 We undertook two surveys among the Slovenian Presidency actors following the 2008 and the 2021 Council Presidencies. The surveys were distributed by the Ministry of Foreign (and European) Affairs as an online questionnaire to those officials that were identified as Presidency actors by the Ministry. The surveys differ insofar as to take account of changes in the EU, primarily the changing role of the rotating presidency of the EU. Cf. Kajnc & Svetličič (2010) for the methodological explanation on the survey.

The preparation for, and organisation of, the 2008 and 2021 Presidencies were similar, yet with important differences in the approach to the Presidency project and with changes following the change of government in 2020. A comparison of the organisational aspects is summarised in Table 2 below. Organisation of the 2021 Presidency was more political in the description of its tasks and reflected on the changes in the functioning of Brussels institutions. Leadership of the 2021 Presidency initially rested within the Prime Minister's office. This was partly the result of changes in the coordination of European affairs in 2012, which saw a dismantling of the Government Office for European Affairs and the placing of its departments into the Ministry for Foreign Affairs. Situating the Presidency project closer to the Prime Minister also reflected on institutional changes at the EU level and subsequent crises, which cemented the European Council at the centre of EU decision-making. The new government in 2020 (with many of its lead European affairs experts also in prominent positions during the 2008 Presidency) later moved the nucleus of the Presidency project to the Minister of Foreign Affairs but planned (though never implemented) for a specially designated state secretary in charge of relations with the European Parliament, in recognition of the importance of the latter for the success of the Presidency. The inclusion of the Permanent Representative in Brussels into the core organisational group is a testimony of the understanding of the importance of the post as not only a recipient of instructions but also a policy shaper. This is also in line with conclusions by Eisele et al. (2023, 332) that 'a high degree of experience in terms of expertise, credibility and reputation is crucial in terms of the organisation of the presidency in particular.'

Both of Slovenia's Presidency turns were so-called 'Brussels-based' Presidencies, meaning interdepartmental coordination and day-to-day operational decisions were taken in Brussels (Kajnič & Svetličič, 2010; Apelblat, 2021). The overall lower political exposure of the Presidency in Brussels the second time affected the political nature of the Presidency project. The first Presidency was very much oriented towards proving its own aptness for belonging to, and in fact leading, the EU as well as defending the system in which small member states must be given a chance to lead (Kajnič, 2009, 89). In contrast, the second Presidency was more politicised and strategically oriented towards domestic politics. This can be seen in the shift towards the Prime Minister's office, the attention paid to domestic public support, and the importance placed upon the long-term benefits for Slovenia of the efforts and resources dedicated to the Presidency (cf. Government of the Republic of Slovenia, 2019; 2020). These changes are partially a consequence of the diminished roles of the Prime Minister and the Minister of Foreign Affairs, as well as the lack of high-level international meetings that would shine light on them at the EU level. They also correspond to lower public support for EU membership in Slovenia in the decade leading up to the 2021 Presidency (Bučar & Udovič, 2023).

In this light, it is particularly telling that according to the results of our surveys, lack of effective cooperation within ministries/agencies was considered a problem for 40.4% of respondents in 2021, while only for 18.8% of respondents in 2008.

Table 2: Organisational structure of the 2008 and 2021 Presidency: bodies, composition, tasks (Government Office for European Affairs, 2007; Government of the Republic of Slovenia, 2019; 2020).

Organisational structure	2008	2021
Core organisational group	Prime Minister, Ministers of Finance, Foreign Affairs and Public Administration, State Secretary for European Affairs/ Head of Government Office for European Affairs; formulates general political directives and priorities of the Presidency, oversees preparation and implementation of the Presidency	Prime Minister, Ministers of Finance, Foreign Affairs and Public Administration, State Secretary for European Affairs in the Prime Minister's Office, Permanent representative to the EU, following revision in 2020 added: Secretary General of the Government, Secretary of State for European Affairs in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, newly established post of a Secretary of State for relations with the EP (never appointed); exercises political and strategic leadership, oversees preparation and implementation of the Presidency project
Head of the Presidency project	Prime Minister as head of the core group	State Secretary in the Prime Minister's office (2019), changed to the Minister for Foreign Affairs following the 2020 revision
Broad project group	Representatives of all relevant ministries and government offices and heads of subgroups, led by State Secretary/ Head of Government Office for European Affairs; coordinates, directs and oversees the work of the subgroups and ministries and government offices.	State secretaries from all relevant ministries and government offices and heads of subgroups, led by the head of the Presidency project (initially State Secretary in the Prime Minister's office, changed to the Minister for Foreign Affairs in 2020); adopts operational decisions on the basis of direction from the core group.
Subgroups within the broad project group	Subgroups for programme, human resources, communication and promotion, budget and secretariat of the Presidency	Subgroups for programme, human resources, communication and promotion, budget and secretariat for coordination of the preparation, logistics and implementation of the Presidency
Secretariat for the Presidency	Project group for coordination of preparation and implementation of the Presidency within the Government Office for European Affairs, Secretariat for the Presidency under the Secretary General of the Government; organisational and logistical support	Secretariat for coordination of the preparation, logistics and implementation of the Presidency, initially in the Prime Minister's office, following the 2020 revision in the Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs; organisational and logistical support and other tasks

Similarly, cooperation between ministries/agencies was considered a bigger issue in 2021 (an increase from 21.8% in 2008 to 38.1% in 2021). As many as 79.5% in 2008 claimed that when the Republic of Slovenia's next Presidency turn comes round, it would be necessary to upgrade interdepartmental cooperation, while 66.2% responded that cooperation within ministries and institutions in the country would be necessary (Kajnič & Svetličič, 2010, table 8). Despite having identified the difficulties in 2021, only 22.3% of respondents, agreed or fully agreed with the statement that an agency/ministry should be reorganised to achieve greater effectiveness in working with the EU.

In terms of human resources (numbers and preparation), the two Presidency terms show similarities in their approach, but also significant differences. In terms of the number of additional staff that needed to be hired, the numbers were almost the same for both terms for extra hirings for the Permanent Representation in Brussels, with around 10% less additional staff hired in Ljubljana in 2021 and a reduction in extra staff for diplomatic representations in a third country (in favour of more staff positioned in Brussels) (Government Office for European Affairs, 2007; Government of Republic of Slovenia 2019; 2020). The 2021 Presidency also gave less prominence to seconded experts and third country experts hired for running the Presidency, which demonstrates the maturity of Slovenia's public administration in European affairs in comparison to 2008 (Government of Republic of Slovenia, 2019; 2020). Learning from criticism in 2008 when the majority of the contracts of the extra staff hired ended immediately after the end of the Presidency (Kajnič & Svetličič, 2010, 90), the 2021 contracts for such staff ended three months after the end of the Presidency term (Government of the Republic of Slovenia, 2019; 2020). This allowed time for debriefs and consideration of and support for future employment of the extra staff hired.

Preparation for the staff undertaking various new functions was substantial in both cases, and was obligatory in 2021 (Government of Republic of Slovenia, 2019; 2020). The second turn repeated a broad approach to training, designed specifically for staff within different function groups within the Presidency and tailored to civil servants, those in managerial positions and the holders of political office. Apart from the specifics of training during the COVID-19 pandemic and for the conduct of the Presidency affected by the pandemic, the preparation ahead of the 2021 Presidency differed slightly from the previous preparation in three aspects: there was less general training on the EU ahead of the 2021 Presidency, but more time was dedicated to the European Parliament. Instead, more focus was placed on the managerial tasks of the Presidency as well as on communication, including a strong emphasis on language skills.¹⁹ Training on interpersonal skills, including stress management, featured more prominently in 2021. Additionally, in 2021 more attention was paid

19 This is not surprising, since a lack of language skills were singled out as among the main problems in the first Presidency (Kajnič & Svetličič, 2010, 93, 102). However, this must be linked to the articulation of the arguments and persuasion as explained by the respondents.

to collaboration with Slovenian experts as trainers, including those within the public administration (Government Office for European Affairs, 2007; Government of the Republic of Slovenia, 2019; 2020).

Consequently, results in our survey revealed that knowledge of languages has, for instance, substantially improved as reflected in the claims that it was considered less important than in 2008 (95.5% in 2008 compared to 58.1% in 2021). Similar results were obtained for informal contacts and analytical and writing skills, all testifying to the 'internalisation' of these skills, to which many of the Presidency actors in 2008 were first exposed in the dynamic environment of Presidency.

In terms of preparation for and organisation of the 2008 and 2021 Presidencies, continuity and the use of good practice can be seen, as well as adaptation to the current situation. The revision of the organisational structures for the Presidency following the change in government in March 2020 demonstrates the political nature of this adaptation and a difference in the understanding of the relationship between the EU and a member state. This difference is even more visible in the priorities and the programme of the Presidency – more about this below.

Setting of the objectives

The first Slovenian Presidency in 2008 set five priorities: (i) coordination of the ratification process and timely entry into force of the Treaty of Lisbon, (ii) launch of the third cycle of the renewed Lisbon Strategy, (iii) advancing the climate-energy package further by seeking an agreement on further liberalisation of the internal market for gas and electricity, (iv) promoting dialogue between cultures, beliefs and traditions in the context of the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue, and (v) the super priority: bringing the countries of the Western Balkans one step closer to the EU (Slovenian Presidency of the EU, 2008).

Of these priorities, the first three were part of the so-called 'inherited agenda'. Among them the first and the fourth priorities are more symbolic, showing support for European integration, while the EU in fact has no competence over national organisation of the ratification processes. The fifth was a true Slovenian national priority (Kajnič, 2009). The overall pursuit of an 'ever closer Union' and a liberal underpinning of the objectives characterises the Presidency (e.g. through market liberalisation and focus on the knowledge and innovation part of the Lisbon Strategy). Objectives were set for the priority files, while most other dossiers had operational objectives (SVEZ, 2007). In relation to the Western Balkans, for example, a very specific objective was set to bring each of the candidates one-step closer to EU membership (Kajnič, 2009). To this end, the overall objective of proving that a new small member state can assume the responsibility of the Presidency must be added (Kajnič, 2009).

Setting of the 2021 objectives follows a similar pattern of a combination of inherited agenda, symbolic and substantive objectives and an overall objective or purpose of the Presidency. Its major priorities were: (i) the resilience, recovery and strategic

autonomy of the European Union, (ii) a Conference on the Future of Europe, (iii) a Union of the European way of life, the rule of law and equal criteria for all, and (iv) a credible and secure European Union, capable of ensuring security and stability in its neighbourhood.

Within the first priority, the majority of pressing EU dossiers were in line with the Commission's work programme (on green and digital transitions, and on recovery and resilience following the COVID-19 crisis) and international agenda (COP26 Glasgow). As part of its role in holding the Presidency, it fell to Slovenia to fulfil the role of representative on behalf of the Council at the Conference on the Future of Europe. This was unavoidable, but also in line with Slovenia's long-term stance as a supporter of European integration. The third priority, however, strongly demonstrates an ideological vision of the government in office, which was struggling at home and facing continued protests due to the deteriorating rule of law situation. The last priority incorporated constant support for the Western Balkans, but also specifically mentioned the need to strengthen transatlantic ties, among others.

Achievements

The 2008 Presidency was broadly considered a success, albeit from a low bar,²⁰ having proven the capacity of a small, new member state to manage the Council. This was contrary to the speculations surrounding the 2004 enlargement process when questions were raised about the new members' capacity to effectively execute the Presidency as well as the potential negative effects on the work of EU institutions. The prevailing assumption was that they would slow down the decision-making process (König, 2007; Malová et al., 2010). As this did not materialise to such an extent, research, however, showed that new members needed time to adjust and to fully participate in EU politics, policy and decision-making processes (Malová et al., 2010; Toshkov, 2017). The early Presidency stint worked as an accelerator for Slovenia in terms of coming to grips with the actors, issues and processes in Brussels. The Presidency exposed it to Brussels' institutional apparatus and the depths of many of the policies it had not dealt with previously. It made EU institutions and other countries interested in making their own preferences known to the actors involved in the Slovenian Presidency (Kajnč & Svetličič, 2010).

A closer look provides a more nuanced picture in terms of the question of whether a small, new member state can lead the Council. On the one hand, an extra challenge of Kosovo's declaration of independence in the early days of the Presidency, did not derail Slovenia's work on progress in Western Balkans relations with the EU. Slovenia's knowledge and resources it had been dedicating (and continues to do so) to the region paid off. On the other hand, the assessment of achievements on other priorities is less straight forward. Other member states and the Commission

20 The Economist (16. 11. 2006, 34), for example, remarked that Slovenia really had just one priority for its term: to run it smoothly, or according to one official interviewed by the Economist: 'just not screw it up'.

occasionally showed that they prefer to deal with a big member state. On substantive dossiers occasionally the most difficult issues were not always placed on the agenda. Instead, they were left for the next – French – Presidency to tackle them. Alternatively, sometimes only operational objectives were set, leaving the direction of the dossier to the influence of other EU institutions or member states (Kajnič, 2009).

At the same time, the 2008 Presidency suffered from a series of external events on which it had to organise the EU's response. Some of them were international events taking place in areas beyond Slovenian presence and reach (e.g. the situation in Myanmar), and other actors, such as the European Commission, quickly stepped in (Kajnič, 2009). In other, most notably in case of an already mentioned declaration of independence by Kosovo, Slovenia's leadership profited from its deep knowledge of the issue.

The 2021 Presidency was far more influenced by external events, primarily by the COVID-19 pandemic and poly crises. Still, according to the government reports, the 2021 Presidency achieved all the set goals (Government of the Republic of Slovenia, 2021). By the end of Slovenia's presidency, 22 national recovery plans had been approved and significant progress in the field of health and digitisation had been achieved. Improvements were achieved in minimum wages in the EU and in terms of equal pay for women and men. Encouraging changes were implemented in relation to the EU's common migration and asylum policy, and the European future for the partners of the Western Balkans was confirmed at the Brdo Summit. The Presidency also significantly contributed to the progress of the EU in such important and priority areas, such as crisis management, health union, digital transformation, the rule of law, the process of expansion to the Western Balkans and cyber security (Government of the Republic of Slovenia, 2021).

Despite the post-Lisbon rotating Presidency focus on legislative work and relations with the European Parliament, Slovenia's achievements – just like the objectives – stress the importance of the role of political initiative of the Presidency. The Brdo Declaration of 6 October 2021 in which the European perspective of the Western Balkans Six was confirmed, even though little other substantive progress was included, was seen as a major achievement and a confirmation of the long-standing role of a Western Balkans advocate. The work on cybersecurity, combining two priorities (resilience, recovery and strategic autonomy and security of the EU), spanned from legislative work to awareness raising and preparing the ground to share understanding by organising a major conference. It also brought together representatives of the Western Balkans and the EU for discussions on enhancing cyber security on the continent. These discussions were followed up by specific actions.²¹

In terms of legislative files, substantial progress was made, and many files were concluded, most notably in the areas of resilience and digitalisation, as well as in other policies (cf. the list on SI PRES, 2021), despite still operating under the

21 For example, Slovenia and France, together with Montenegro, set up the Western Balkans Cyber Capacity Centre in Podgorica, Montenegro.

shadow of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the European Commission's (2021) Rule of Law Report and the European Parliament resolution on the fundamental rights and the rule of law in Slovenia overshadowed the Presidency. The reports stated grave violations by the government of the rule of law, media independence and anti-corruption measures. The postponed nomination of its representatives to the European Public Prosecutor's Office (EPPO) raised concerns about its commitment to fighting corruption and upholding EU legal standards, diplomatic awkwardness (for example, when Prime Minister Janez Janša congratulated Donald Trump on winning the US election, which was in fact won by Joe Biden) made Slovenia more visible within the EU, however, fraternisation with Eurosceptic, populist politics was misdirected (e.g. Avbelj, 2021; Fink-Hafner, 2020; Požgan & Bojinović Fenko, 2022). In the eyes of the Presidency actors, these political developments, however, did not seem to affect the exercise of the Presidency. Namely, the assessment of the achievements of the Presidencies by the Presidency actors who responded to the surveys we conducted following both Presidency turns, provided almost the same results to the question on their assessment of the Presidency: 75% of respondents assessed the Presidencies in both cases as excellent and very good and less than 1% as poor.

What does the future hold for Slovenia's EU membership?

The comparison of handling of the Presidency under very different economic, political and institutional circumstances revealed an interplay between the elements of continuity and change, adaptation to the situation at hand and space for political partisanship, despite the diminished role of the rotating Presidency under the Treaty of Lisbon.

The first and perhaps most important stepping stone for the positive impact of Presidencies on 'ordinary' membership is the importance of political unity in creating and advocating national interests. This was formally achieved during the first Presidency but not during the second, when domestic political issues strongly influenced the whole presidency. Domestic political issues were also played out in Brussels' institutions, resulting in a negative impact on Slovenia's image and influence. The second Presidency was notably easier due to accumulated valuable managerial, organisational and communication experience and networks in the years following the first term in office. It can also be said that in the years following the first Presidency, Slovenia developed a sense of belonging, while also starting to become more confident about its own specific national interests (Svetličič, 2024, 110). The Presidency gave Slovenians the necessary self-esteem to improve its, in the words of Iztok Seljak, 'negative value system demonstrated in the lack of self-confidence, consequently too low and not enough ambitious goals and too weak cooperation' (Weiss, 2024, 45).

These two sets of lessons – the importance of domestic politics and of experience for the maturity of the country's engagement in Brussels – are the most important

takeaways from both Presidencies for the ‘ordinary’ membership period. As Table 1 shows, there is little overlap between the roles of the Presidency and ‘ordinary’ membership, however, they overlap in the most important element for a member state – that of focusing its work on the Council. Furthermore, there is a close connection in relation to the nature of the two roles. The skills required and acquired to broker compromises are transferrable to the role of promoting national interest. Enhanced hard skills and basic organisational/managerial knowledge accumulated during the first Presidency, combined with upgraded skills for facing unexpected events, form a very useful stepping-stone for improving the benefits of ‘ordinary’ membership in the future.

The importance of unity in domestic politics extends downward into the government services. Lack of effective cooperation within ministries as well as between them prevented efficient implementation of the Presidency priorities or national interests at the EU level, even in cases when there was a national consensus about basic national interests, albeit this was not always the case (Svetličič & Kajnič, 2010). Although the competencies acquired during the two Presidencies helped secure benefits from membership, they did not shield Slovenia from numerous mistakes and lost opportunities for a more efficient pursuit of benefits from membership and also did not prevent mistakes in the pursuit of national interests. Resource limitations frequently lead to an inability to prioritise, overly slow adjustments to uncertainties, weak collaborations with partners, poor communication and visibility, inadequate coordination, overestimating of capacities and not making appropriate alliances.

Some of such limitations can be compensated by leveraging the unique strengths of small countries, such as flexibility, enhanced collaboration and a strong commitment to European integration. Creating coalitions with the right partners is a key tool in increasing the weight of small states through collective action (Högenauer & Mišić, 2024). Unfortunately, Slovenia is among the least-desired partners for coalition creation in the EU (cf. Naurin & Lindahl, 2008; Busse et al., 2020). In many aspects, Slovenia does not have natural coalition partners: it is geographically positioned at the crossroad of various coalitions and shares interests in environment, budgetary, agricultural and many other policies with members of various traditional like-minded groups. At the same time, Slovenian politicians, diplomats and officials do appear less active than some of their peers as suggested by the analysis of their attendance at formal as well as (anecdotal) observations on attendance at informal events (Svetličič, 2024, 114). Such lower attendance also diminishes the networking activity, and with this the opportunities to establish long-term relationships through informal contacts outside official meetings/negotiations. At the same time, interest organisations from Slovenia have also been found less active than average in using lobbying methods and techniques at the EU level (Hafner-Fink et al., 2016, 621). This is a serious weakness, since a lack of soft skills, particularly speedy adjustments and decision-making, coalition building and informal contacts, became *sine qua non* for the creation of novel solutions to address new problems and consensus building. However, the accumulated hard knowledge about EU affairs during the

Presidencies and standard managerial and organisational skills are insufficient if the right mix of hard and soft knowledge/skills is not achieved.

Despite limitations and mistakes, the benefits of conducting a Presidency for 'ordinary' membership are obvious and can even be enhanced by focusing on further strengthening soft skills, displaying political unity and prioritising the pursuit of national interests.

PRVO IN DRUGO PREDSEDOVANJE SLOVENIJE SVETU EVROPSKE UNIJE: NAUKI ZA POVEČANJE KORISTI OD ČLANSTVA V EVROPSKI UNIJI

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POVZETEK

Članek primerja predsedovanje Slovenije Svetu EU v letih 2008 in 2021 ter proučuje razlike v pripravi, organizaciji, ciljih in dosežkih v različnih institucionalnih, gospodarskih in političnih kontekstih obeh predsedovanj. Naloge predsedovanja se bistveno razlikujejo od nalog rednega članstva v EU, saj je predsedovanje bolj kot na zastopanje nacionalnih interesov osredotočeno na vodstvene vloge in odnose z drugimi institucijami. Vendar kompetenca, pridobljena v eni vlogi, lahko vpliva na uspešnost v drugi. Med prvim in drugim predsedovanjem Slovenije se je institucionalna pokrajina EU drastično spremenila, zlasti zaradi Lizbonske pogodbe, ki je na novo opredelila vlogo predsedujoče države članice, tako da jo je osredotočila na zakonodajne funkcije in prenesla velik del nalog zunanjega zastopanja na predsednika Evropskega sveta in na Visokega predstavnika. Poleg tega je EU v času pred in med drugim mandatom Slovenije zaznamovala vrsta kriz – gospodarska, finančna, migracijska, brexit, COVID-19 in izredne podnebne razmere –, ki so predstavljale izziv za gospodarsko in geopolitično stabilnost EU. Ti različni konteksti so pripeljali do različnih pristopov med predsedovanjema Slovenije. Predsedovanje 2021 je pokazalo večjo samozavest pri izbiri političnih ciljev, bilo je bolj prilagojeno vse manjši podpori EU v javnosti ter je odražalo politično in institucionalno dogajanje znotraj EU. Obe predsedovanji sta pomembno vplivali na izkušnjo slovenskega članstva v EU, saj sta okrepili njene kompetence, mreže in vpliv v Uniji. Ta primerjava pokaže, kako razvijajoči se pristop Slovenije k njenemu predsedovanju EU odraža njen politični odnos z EU in njeno prilagajanje spreminjajoči se dinamiki Unije, vendar razkriva tudi njene pomanjkljivosti v smislu virov in odnosnih sposobnosti.

Ključne besede: Slovenija, predsedovanje Svetu Evropske unije, Evropska unija, male države, dosežki, kontekst

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