Lobbying (regionally) the European Union through the rotating presidencies of the European Council

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Summary

The theoretical development in several social disciplines identifies a transformation of the functionality of sub-state governments. It has been argued that regions progressively acquire functions of representation, legitimacy and governability within the state, at national but also at international scale. Furthermore, it has been claimed that the European Union (EU) rotating presidencies (which still co-exists even with the entry into force of the Treaty of Lisbon) constitute such an interesting opportunity for the Member States to –during a six months period- highlight their own interests, at European scale. And thus, influencing the EU political agenda. Within this context, we will seek to underline how the Member States regional participation affects the different EU presidencies.

Hence, the objective of this research will be to assess the influence of the regional institutional actors (regional parliaments, cabinets and representation offices in Brussels) on the main priorities and policies of the countries’ presidency of the EU. Very little scientific research has been done on the study of the rotating presidency of the Council of the EU and, to our knowledge; nothing has ever been done around the involvement of the regional actors in such process. Our aim is therefore to fill in this gap in the political science literature by identifying the key regional actors in the Presidency of the EU and drawing conclusions from the comparison of the recent experiences of two highly regionalised countries, this is the Spanish (January – June 2010) and Belgian (July – December 2010) presidencies. This attempt constitutes an innovative and unique opportunity to fully study the impact of the regions on the presidency of the Council of the EU (the next presidencies of the EU for Spain and Belgium are scheduled in 2023).
1. Introduction

Much has been said around the introduction of the position of the president of the EU council once the Lisbon treaty has been ratified. The creation of this position and its mediatisation shadowed the fact that the system of the rotating presidency of the council will remain present and part of the institutional structures. Every six months a different European country takes the presidency of the council over and therefore influences the direction of the EU policy during its term. Even if this presidency only concerns the council, it has a direct impact on other institutions and actors, mainly in terms of agenda, decision-making processes and policy priorities.

Globally, the regions have a significant impact on the policies of the EU: directly and formally through the committee of the regions or due to their participation in the council or in the committees of the European commission; directly and informally through their representation offices in Brussels and their lobbying activities alone or joining and cooperating with other regions; or indirectly through the official mechanism and representation of their national state. The regions are nowadays more and more included in the daily decision-making processes of the EU. A significant example is the consultation of all relevant regional actors and institutions when important issues are at stake at the European level, such as the debate around the constitution or the Lisbon treaty. The rotating presidencies are in this regard another opportunity for the regions to exert some influence on the European (and in some extent national) policies.

This research intends to analyse the contributions of the regions to the various tasks and issues related to the presidencies of the European Union. The presidency constitutes for some regions a unique opportunity to give some light on their presence, main characteristics and assets and to put their specific issues high on the political agenda. Not only can the presidency set the agenda for the six forthcoming months, but it may also prioritize some domestic and regional issues at the EU level. Regions from federal or highly decentralised states take the opportunity to emphasize during the presidency particular policies such as regional development, structural funds, culture and language, trade and education.

We set ourselves the task of analysing the factors that trigger or block the sub-national entities participation within the rotating presidencies of the countries they belong to. Particularly, we will analyse the regional influence (but also the factors that promoted it) exerted by the 17 Spanish Comunidades Autónomas and the three regions and three communities in Belgium during the Spanish and Belgian presidencies in 2010. The comparative analysis will be used to identify the different organisational adaptations of the regional framework, which will help to introduce new visions about the regional processes.

Indeed, our initial main hypotheses are threefold: (1) The presidency constitutes for some regions a unique opportunity to give publicity on their presence, main characteristics and assets and to put their specific issues high on the European political agenda; (2) the involvement of the sub-national entities is not equal, and thus some of them would be more directly and more importantly involved in the presidency process than others, depending on their autonomy, their size or their wealth; (3) due to the high centralisation of the main political events in Brussels or in the capital city, regions should compensate the lack of visibility for their region and be more active in the organisation of so-called para-events (cultural events, conferences, seminars, etc.).
Lobbying (regionally) the European Union through the rotating presidencies of the European Council

Jorge Tuñón

Through mainly an exhaustive events codification and data collection (but also some interviews and key policy documents analysis), we will identify some common patterns of regional influence on the decision-making process in the Council of the European Union, on other institutions and bodies and on the overall priorities of the EU. Furthermore, we will be able to compare across countries and across different types of regions. Indeed, all analysed regions are not equal in autonomy, demographic weight, specific culture and language, wealth or even geographic location. All these variables will be included in a global explanatory model in order to fully grasp the sometimes diverging characteristics of each region of Belgium and Spain and their influence of the EU through the rotating presidency of the Council.

2. Sub-state mobilisation within the Europeanization process: an overview

The regional issue could be substantiated through two different logics. We may distinguish the bottom-up one, on the one hand, and the top-down one, on the other hand. The first logic relational direction goes from the regional or sub-state level towards the state (regionalism); while the second logic goes, on the contrary, from the state towards the regional level (regionalisation).

On the one hand, as stated a decade ago by Michael Keating (1998b: 573), the so-called “New Regionalism” is a phenomenon born in the 1960s that crystallized during the 1970s. Indeed, as the primary concept (region), the regionalism implies a complex variety of phenomena (Keating, 1998). Thus, Mario Caciagli’s wide definition is quite valid: “regionalism is the process, first cultural and after, but not always, political, produced by a community provided with a strong feeling of territorial membership” (Caciagli, 2006: 12). This definition highlights some of the main concept variables, such as the common territory, language, ethnic group, and history or ideology, which also build a common identity (Tuñón, 2010a).

On the other hand, within the context of regionalisation, many factors made the regional level more suitable than the state or the supra-national organisations, due to its proximity with the citizens. The regional execution advantages are due to the size, the offered services’ typology, the population representation or its accessibility, to name a few. Moreover, there is a wide range of specific advantages that promote regionalisation processes: the major permeability and proximity of the regional and local governments to the necessities of its citizens; the most efficient use of public resources; or its much developed complicity with its internal groups and cultures (Tuñón, 2009). Although Regionalisation and Supra-National integration could seem contradictory and incompatible concepts from a European perspective; we also state that “Europeanization and Regionalisation should be considered the process’s two facades” (European Union, 1999: 277), when participation and democratic responsibility also become key-process elements.

Both the Third level and the Multilevel Governance theories should be also pointed out within this research. Following the Third Level theory, the sub-national authorities enjoy a growing influence within the European model. In fact, they have been recognised the possibility to develop some of the capacities, but also to reach a legal and political status within the EU institutional architecture. Indeed, the Third Level concept refers to the sub-national entities action and linkage within the EU framework, together with the first level (the European institutions) but also with the second level (member states) (Tuñón, 2009: 19). Therefore, it is not possible to deny the existence of this regional/third governance level and its influence, just below the member states and the EU.
Lobbying (regionally) the European Union through the rotating presidencies of the European Council

Jorge Tuñón

This level is often closer to the citizens and, most of the times, also more useful and efficient to carry out European policies. Therefore, the Third Level and the (so-called) Multilevel Governance (MLG) interaction is very evident. While the Third level could be understood as a political-institutional project, the MLG is an interpretative schema, an abstract model about the power relation evolution among the Governance levels within the EU (Caciagli, 2006: 123). This means that the European Governance is shared among different but interconnected levels, and that the sub-national is the third one of them.

Hence, the EU appears as a new political dimension characterized by authority dispersion and the capacities shared among the different government levels. However, member states still play a predominant role in the European process. However, they are obliged to confront other actors that limit their action (Tuñón, 2009: 21). The emergence of this MLG model (pioneered by Gary Marks, 1993) is due to an extensive institutional building and decision-making (UE-regions) reallocation process. Together with Liesbet Hooghe, Marks defined the MLG as: “the decision-making process authority dispersion through multiple territorial levels (sub-national, national and supra-national)” (Hooghe and Marks, 2001).

A well-known phenomenon within the comparative politics literature (since the 1990s) has also been the regional European activation. Liesbet Hooghe (1995) first used the “sub-national mobilisation” concept, which has been regularly adopted by many other academics (for example Claeys et al., 1998; Négrier and Jouve, 1998; Keating, 2004). It aimed to describe the performances of sub-national entities within the European decision-making process. It was apprehended in its descendant dimension as mere “arenas” of European policies, but also its ascendant perspective seeking to become influential actors within the European process. Finally, Leonardo Morlino (Fargion et al., 2006), among others, contested this concept of sub-national mobilisation and proposed another concept: activation.

Although the sub-national para-diplomacy is not a new issue, scholars never paid similar attention during the past decades. As Keating states, currently the inputs/outputs dilemma turned out to be profitable from the regional perspective. Thus, the sub-national entities have well-constructed strategies to influence European policies as much as possible. In fact, nowadays regional attitudes at the European level are much promoted by their own regional, but also national level frameworks. Thus, the sub-national administrative and political elites develop (more or less) systematic and extensive strategies to influence the European decision making-process. Through initiatives, actions or decisions, the European regions seek to assure an active and visible presence at the EU level. It is impossible to deny that regions develop a vast European activation through different paths or mechanisms (Caciagli, 2006: 220). The development of formal channels to involve the sub-national governments within the European decision-making process, the cooperation activities implemented within the interregional organizations framework (even outside the EU programmes), or the European regional offices set up in Brussels prove the European regional activation. These patterns constitute the sub-State reaction towards the new possibilities provided by the European framework: regional participation in the Committee of the Regions, but also (to some extent) in the European Commission (through the Comitology system) and the Council of Ministers (Dandoy and Massart-Pièrard, 2005; Tuñón, 2009).

Since the 1990s, the European sub-national entities have become conscious of the advantages offered by the cultivation of the access channels to the European Institutions. Regions realised the amount of influence they would be able to obtain within the design of European policies. Hence,
regions have gradually established direct formulas to deal with Brussels, while they also have promoted non direct or mediated – through their own states – mechanisms (Tuñón and Dandoy, 2009; and Tuñón 2011). Within the described framework, European regions can not waste the growing participation opportunities offered by rotating presidencies to benefit from this mechanism. Regions are additionally allowed to give some light on their presence, and to put their specific issues high on the European political agenda. Their member-states are often being helped to organise the Council presidency while many of them are perfectly ready to benefit from it, and thus influencing the EU decision-making process.

3. The rotating presidencies of the Council of the European Union

One of the major changes introduced by the Treaty of Lisbon has affected the rotating presidencies model. From the political perspective, many have pointed out the lost of influencing and lobbying opportunities due to the Lisbon reform. Even some analyst stated the rotating presidency lost of relevance and visibility. Indeed, the nominations of the Council President and the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, but also the setting up of the TRIO model threatens or erodes the visibility and influence of the country holding the rotating presidency. Although a period of coordination and cohabitation between the rotating and the “permanent” presidencies might be needed, holding the rotating presidency still means “the possibility of exerting influence through, among other things, agenda-setting and external representation” (Bursens and Van Hecke, 2011).

Traditionally, the rotating presidency of the Council of Ministers and the European Council never constituted an important issue among the European Union studies literature. Among those who have dealt with the rotating presidencies, some studies have focussed on roles and functions attached to it (Schalk et all 2007; Tallberg 2003, 2004, 2006 and 2007); and others on influence or success from a multiple or single case oriented perspective (Quaglia and Moxon Browne, 2007; Elgström 2003; Beach and Mazzucelli, 2007; or Bunse, 2009). However, to date there are no analyses of the participation, opportunities, visibility or influence exerted by the sub-national entities within the rotating presidencies framework.

As it has been already been pointed out, the rotating presidencies constitute (also for the regions) an opportunity to set and manipulate the agenda, display initiatives, broker agreements, show leaderships or/and represent the decision body vis-à-vis third parties (Bursens and Van Hecke, 2011). Following the so-called “Power of the chair” theory (Tallberg, 2006 and 2007), “negotiation chairs generally benefit from privileged access to a set of important power resources, notably information and procedural control” (Tallberg, 2007: 23). Indeed, as chairmen they are able to persuade positions through more appealing arguments; they open, set up the agenda and conclude the meetings; but they also manage the voting and summarize the results. Even taking into account some constraints, the rotating presidency can surely shape the political priorities of the agenda and affect the outcome of the meetings. In doing so, the presidency can contribute with the introduction of its own issues (agenda-setting function); attributing relative weight or emphasizing the items already in the agenda that need to be dealt with (agenda-structuring function); or remaining silent and keeping certain issues away from the agenda (agenda-exclusion function) (Tallberg 2003 and 2007).
Lobbying (regionally) the European Union through the rotating presidencies of the European Council

Jorge Tuñón

Political elites so often recognize the significance of the Presidency office in the European Council as a platform and resource to upgrade the opportunities to influence the decision-making process. This is even more appealing in the case of the small and medium-sized countries (Tallberg, 2007; Bunse, 2009). In fact, according to Tallberg, “representatives of small and medium-sized countries tend to rank access to the Presidency as the most important source of power, particularly for themselves, since they can not rely on advantages on structural power”. Bunse’s analysis on small states and EU governance through the leadership within the rotating council presidencies (2009) agrees with Tallberg. Indeed, she states that the rotating presidencies have become into a mechanism to equalise power differences between the EU’s small and big member states. Moreover, she also argues that the influence exerted within the presidency framework by the holding country depends on four main factors: the leadership environment; the heterogeneity, intensity and distribution of preferences in the Council; inter-institutional relations; and the skill and use of the Council Secretariat (Bunse, 2009: 5).

Despite the main referred different analysis have pointed out from different perspectives many opportunities given by the rotating presidencies of the Council to exert - to some extend - some kind of influence; no hints have been found (to date) about the role of the sub-national entities.

4. Spanish and Belgian presidencies: A matter of regions?

The 2010 rotating presidencies of the Council have been hold by both countries with federal or quasi federal structures. The regional involvement in this process can be compared and contrasted. In addition, Spain and Belgium have been similarly affected by the implementation of the Treaty of Lisbon on the one hand, and the world-wide economic crisis on the other hand. Moreover, both countries have had to deal with relatively uncomfortable internal contexts. Indeed, the international economical crisis impact was even harder in Spain where financial cuttings (even affecting the wages of the civil servants) to reduce the public debt were decided during the presidency. But, internal situation in Belgium was not much better. The whole presidency had to be managed by a care-taker government, since Belgian internal politics have prevented the formation of a federal government since June 2010.

Moreover, both presidencies’ programmes were related to the so-called “Trio Presidencies” programme. It emphasized about the needs for cooperation between Spain and Belgium, but also Hungary. Furthermore, it intended that the three presidencies would work “closely together with each other and also with the President of the European Council, the High Representative, the European Commission and the European Parliament” (European Union, 2009). A clear loyalty has been exhibited by both Spain and Belgium during their presidencies, while dealing with these matters. However, the Spanish one maybe did not pay enough attention to the institutional limits designed by the rotating presidencies, even bigger after Lisbon. Since the Spanish government had much relied on the presidency to overcome the national internal difficulties, the lowering of the political profile of the six months in power (due to the loyalty exhibited towards the commitments of the new managerial positions) made it a bit disappointing for the Spanish interests. Attention to the implementation of the Treaty of Lisbon and the establishment of the new EU institutional set-up has also been fully accomplished by the Belgian Presidency. Even more, it has used its federal
political structure and experienced public administration to counter speculative fears of a weak presidency (Beke, 2011).

This has been the overall context, the regions and communities in Belgium and Spain have found during 2010 to try to determine their respective presidencies. Since visibility but also political influence could be (more easily than usual) could be achieved, the sub-State entities of both countries have been involved in the process of the presidency of their State. Therefore, the next sections will analyse the degree of dynamism (exhibited by Spanish and Belgian regions and communities) in the organisation of presidency events: official political meetings, conferences organised by pressure groups or cultural events, to name a few.

5. Data and variables

The rotating presidency of the European Union does not only mean exercising the formal presidency of ministers’ meetings but plenty of other events, activities, manifestations, etc. are associated to this phenomenon. During the Spanish and Belgian presidency (respectively January - June and July - December 2010) no less than 1480 events have been recorded. These events were unequally spread over the two presidencies and covered various types of meetings (from European Council meetings to cultural events), various types of actors (from the UN representatives to local citizens associations or even individuals) and various issues (from foreign affairs to purely technical industrial processes). These events were all coded into an integrated database. The main variables for each event in this database are the type of event, its topic, its date and duration and its geographical location.

Each event has therefore been coded into a category, according to its type or its nature. Different categories have been distinguished. The three encompassing categories are the political meetings, the so-called ‘non political’ events and the cultural events. The first category consists in all political meetings organised by institutionalised actors and coded in sub-categories, i.e. Council of Ministers meetings, European Council meetings, European parliament meetings, Permanent Representatives meetings, Officials and experts meetings, meetings with Third Countries as well as informal meetings at the ministerial level.

The second category of events regroups – under the label “Seminars and Conferences” mainly the events organised by non-institutional actors (i.e. companies, lobbies, pressure groups, NGOs, universities, etc.) even in the presence of institutional or political actors, as well as scientific or vulgarisation conferences, workshops, seminars, forums or congresses regarding specific aspects of the presidency and of the EU policies. The last category consists in various cultural events, such as exhibitions, museum collections, theatre, movies, concerts, dance performances, parties, etc. It regroups different types of events that intend to promote EU-related issues and successes to the Belgian population, as well to promote Belgium’s image and artists to other EU countries.
Lobbying (regionally) the European Union through the rotating presidencies of the European Council

Jorge Tuñón

Table 1. Number of Presidency events (per category)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Spanish Presidency</th>
<th>Belgian Presidency</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political Meetings</td>
<td>428</td>
<td>332</td>
<td>764</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>58.79 %</td>
<td>44.15 %</td>
<td>51.62 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seminars and Conferences</td>
<td>112</td>
<td>206</td>
<td>314</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>15.38 %</td>
<td>27.39 %</td>
<td>21.22 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural Events</td>
<td>156</td>
<td>166</td>
<td>322</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>21.43 %</td>
<td>22.07 %</td>
<td>21.76 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4.40 %</td>
<td>6.38 %</td>
<td>5.41 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>728</td>
<td>752</td>
<td>1480</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>100.00 %</td>
<td>100.00 %</td>
<td>100.00 %</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Distinguishing each type of event is important as one should be able to contrast the political and symbolic value of a political meeting in the European Parliament in Strasbourg with a jazz concert organised in a peripheral region. It allows us to see whether some policy level (mainly federal and regional) focus on one specific type of event, whether they try to diversify their activities, or whether they attempt to compensate their lack of EU policy competences by organising more ‘alternative’ events. In Table 1, we observe that the Spanish and the Belgian presidencies can be distinguished in terms of the amount of organised political meetings. This type of meetings represents significantly more than the half of the Spanish presidency events, while it only accounts for 44.15% of the total amount of events organised during the Belgian presidency. The difference is also to be remarked as far as the number of seminars and conferences is concerned.

Concerning time-related variables, the starting date of the event has been coded, as well as its duration based on its closing date. This duration variable will allow us to weight each event according to its number of days. For example, even if it constitutes one single event, the Climate Convention organised in Cancun in November 2010 that lasted for 12 days should not weight the same on the political agenda as a one-day environmental conference on exactly the same issue. Therefore, parts of our analyses will be based on amount on events weighted by the number of days of each event.

In Graph 2, we observe a large variation of the absolute number of events organised per month. As expected, the months of January, July and August witness fewer events than the other months due to the holidays at both EU and Belgian levels. The same logic explains the small amount of events organised in December as the very last official meeting occurred on the 22 December 2010 (Coreper II meeting). The core moment of the Spanish presidency is therefore
Lobbying (regionally) the European Union through the rotating presidencies of the European Council

Jorge Tuñón

rather evenly spread on five months while the Belgian one can be mostly located on three months (from September to November) with a peak in October 2010 with no less than 202 events organised in the framework of the Belgian presidency.

Finally, the location of the event is included in the database (city – region – country). First of all, as we lack relevant information on the organiser for some events (the organisers have been identified in only 545 cases), the geographical location might be used as a proxy when one wants to identify the policy-level the organiser belongs to. Secondly, the location of the event allows us to investigate the degree of activism of the regional actors, compared to the one of the federal actors. In other words, we grasp the capacity of a political entity to organise presidency events by assessing the amount of events organised on its territory. We observe that the large majority of the events are taking place on the Belgian territory: 880 events, i.e. 59.5% of all presidency events in 2010. No less than 600 events\(^1\) took place in other countries, among which 464 in Spain (31.4%). Surprisingly, only six events have been organised in Hungary, the partner country in the framework of the Trio Presidency.

Graph 2. Number of Presidency events (per month)

\(^1\) One event took place simultaneously in the 27 EU countries. We removed this case for later models using the location variable.
6. Results

In order to assess the relative involvement of the regions in the process of the EU presidency, one has to focus on the Spanish and Belgian national and sub-national actors, and on events organised in Spain and Belgium and leave aside all European considerations. More specifically, no overlap between events organised by Belgian actors and events organised on Belgian territory could be observed. Indeed, many presidency events have been organised by international and EU actors on the Belgian soil, mainly in Brussels. It is for example the case of the European Commission and Parliament, but also of many pan-European organisations such as Eurocities or AWEPA (European Parliamentarians with Africa), European lobbies and pressure groups, such as the Federation of the European Ergonomic Societies or the Aerospace and Defence Industries Association of Europe, and even associations such as Friends of Europe or Generation Europe Foundation. Brussels is the seat and the headquarters of many international and European institutions and associations and these organisations regard the Belgian presidency as an additional opportunity for publicizing their activities. In addition, the Spanish and Belgian political and institutional actors also organised presidency events outside their national territory. It is mainly the case of the national cabinet (with events organised for example in the Netherlands or in France) but also of some regional governments that organised cultural events in Germany and Austria, for example.

Table 3. Number of Presidency events organised in Spain and Belgium, per region

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Spain</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Belgium</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Andalucía</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>12,10%</td>
<td>Bruxelles</td>
<td>476</td>
<td>70,62%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aragón</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>2,38%</td>
<td>German-speaking</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1,19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>community</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asturias</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>2,38%</td>
<td>Vlaanderen</td>
<td>107</td>
<td>15,88%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Balearic Islands</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>2,38%</td>
<td>Wallonie</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>12,31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Basque Country</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1,51%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C. Valenciana</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>2,59%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canary Islands</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1,51%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cantabria</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0,65%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Castilla la Mancha</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2,16%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Castilla y León</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>4,97%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catalonia</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>7,99%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Among the 464 events organised in Spain and the 880 events in Belgium, no less than 1138 of them could be related to a specific region. Missing data is due to the lack of specification on the exact location of the event or to the fact that events are sometimes simultaneously organised in more than one region. Distributing the events per region unsurprisingly confirms that the two capital regions attract the majority of the events: 477 events in Brussels and 245 in Madrid. As previously stated, their status of capitals of respectively Spain and Belgium and, in the latter case, of the seat of the European Union, explain to a larger extent why these events are organised in such regions. As shown in Table 3, the events organised outside these two regions take place in their majority in Flanders (107 events), followed by Wallonia (83 events), and Andalusia (55 events).

If we weight each event by its duration (number of days), we observe a small decrease of the amount of events organised in Madrid and Brussels and a larger share of events taking place in large regions in both countries. In Belgium, the two large regions (Flanders and Wallonia) are still dominating but we observe an inversion of the hierarchy between these regions. But these contrasting figures are probably due to the fact that more cultural events were organised on the Walloon territory.2 The same applies for Spain as, weighting the data, we observe a larger share in the case of Catalonia, Canary Island and, in a larger extent, Castilla y León.

In order to take into account the bias introduced by the events organised in the normal working of the EU institutions (Coreper meetings3, plenary sessions of the European Parliament, etc.) as well as international events whose organisation does not rely on the rotating presidency, such as UN meetings, we removed these events from our database. This will not only help us to focus on purely Presidency events but also to potentially reduce the “capital region” bias, i.e. the fact that most of the events take place in Madrid and Brussels just because they are the capital of the country. Assessing the relative role of the sub-national entities in the framework of an EU Presidency can therefore be done by limiting the analysis to such events.

Among these 1231 non-institutionalised and non-routine events, the proportion of events organised outside the Spanish and Belgian territory is slightly larger. That main be explained by the fact that, for example, cultural or economic events were poorly organised outside these two

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2 On the average, cultural events have a duration of 26,5 days while all other types of events display an average duration of 2,5 days.

3 Among these events, only three took place outside Brussels in 2010: one in Madrid, one in Andalucía and one in the Canary Islands.
countries in the framework of the EU presidency. But, more interesting is the fact the share of events organised in the two capital regions (Madrid and Brussels) is smaller, with respectively 40.4 % and 61.1% of all Spanish and Belgian events. The focus on solely non-institutionalised and non-routine events thus reinforces the presence and impact of the regions on the Presidency process.

Weighting our data with the duration of each event, we observe a reinforcement of the results. The events based in Madrid and Brussels again decrease while the proportion of events organised in almost all other regions increases. Unsurprisingly, Madrid and Brussels are the regions where more but smaller events are organised while the other regions organise less but longer events. In addition, these results confirm our previous statements regarding the importance of cultural, societal and scientific events. These events have on the average a larger duration and could be used by some entities as a way to compensate their poor involvement in the organisation of politically-relevant events.

Indeed, if we now want to test our hypothesis concerning the organisation of so-called “para-events”, we focus in this section only on the cultural events and on the ‘Conferences and Seminars’ category. Results indicate that the two capital regions are still the most active during the Presidency in the organisation of such events: 42.8% of all Spanish cultural and conference-like events were organised in Madrid as well as 69.6% in Brussels in the Belgian case. The hierarchy of the most active regions is also not modified as the two most active regions – after Madrid – are still Andalusia (13.19%) and Catalonia (11.54%). In Belgium, Flanders and Wallonia are relatively active in the organisation of such events with respectively 15.5% and 12.8% of all Belgian cultural and conference-like events. Differences with figures concerning the total number of events are not striking and, in this case, one cannot conclude that regions use cultural events and conferences and seminars as a way to balance the amount of political events organised in the capital region.

In this last section, we integrate the different variables in a larger model. In order to confirm our main hypothesis regarding the fact that stronger/larger regions use the Presidency as an opportunity and a tool for recognition. We operationalised the strength/size of a region in different ways: in terms of population (number of inhabitants), territory size (number of square kilometres), density of population, wealth (and total GDP) and constitutional autonomy (following the regional authority index built by Marks et. al, 2010). Among these size variables, only the population variable is proven to be significant with all Presidency events (correlation of .692**), with only non-institutionalised and non-routine events (.689**), and with only cultural and conference-like events (.667**). No other variable is significant, meaning that the size of a region, its wealth or even its status of “special region” (as in the case of Catalonia, Basque Country, Galicia or Andalucia) does not play a role in the presidency process.

Performing a negative binomial regression, results (not shown) indicate that only one independent variable explains the number of Presidency events organised in one region. Confirming correlation figures, the population variable is significantly (and positively) related to the number of Presidency events. More events will be organised in more populated regions, independently of their size, their wealth, their degree of autonomy or their constitutional status. The only control variables that matters is the country dummy has the Belgian events were spread on a smaller amount of regions than in the Spanish case.
7. Conclusions

Presidencies of the EU are unique opportunities for a country to demonstrate its capacity and skills chairing and organising the European arena. Besides this formal task of articulating the European debate, presidencies also allow various actors (political, socio-economic, academic, from the civil society, etc.) to express their voice and opinion or merely their existence. This article analysed the occurrence of the so-called presidency events, by taking into account different variables. The collected data allowed us to evaluate the presence and dynamism of each political actor and policy level in the framework of the 12 months Spanish and Belgian presidencies. The conclusions are three-fold.

First of all, this article intended to assess the involvement of sub-national actors during the presidency of the EU, compared to the one of national actors. The obtained results confirmed that the presidency still remains strongly on the hands of the national government and that the majority of the events are organised in the capital of the country. Even if Spain and Belgium witness a strong policy decentralisation and if their regions and communities enjoy a direct access to the EU decision-making level, these entities do not manage to strongly influence the presidency agenda, neither directly via the organisation of formal and informal meetings political nor indirectly via cultural and societal events.

Still, regions and communities form Spain and Belgium are relatively active during the presidency. But our results demonstrated that this degree of involvement varies according to the different sub-national entities. Some regions are much more active than others. Unsurprisingly, small entities such as the German-speaking community or La Rioja are relatively less active than others. Overall, large regions, such as Flanders, Wallonia, Andalusia or Catalonia hosted many Presidency events. Besides country differences, the key variable allowing to differentiate the degree of activities between each region has been identified. Large regions in terms of population host more Presidency activities than other regions, independently of their wealth, status, degree of autonomy, etc.

Finally, EU presidencies are composed of a variety of organised events. These events can take the form of various formal and institutional political meetings such as Council meetings or European Parliament plenary sessions but also many other activities from seminar and conferences to numerous cultural events, such as exhibitions or concerts. Our results demonstrate that regions do not use these two latter types of events in order to compensate to the lack of political visibility for their region. Strong regions manage at the same time to attract political meetings to be located in their region (for example, an informal meeting of the council of ministers) as well as a larger amount of cultural events and conferences, meetings, seminars, etc.


Lobbying (regionally) the European Union through the rotating presidencies of the European Council

Jorge Tuñón

References


