

Silencer or Amplifier? The European Union Presidency and the Nordic Countries

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How did the three Nordic European Union member states approach their periods as holders of the European Union (EU) Council Presidency? Two radically different predictions about the impact of the Presidency on member state behaviour can be found in the literature. Some maintain that the position functions as an amplifier, strengthening the already existing tendency to propagate national concerns. Others argue that the Presidency functions as a silencer, subordinating national material interests to the benefit of common European concerns. In this article we analyse the ways in which Finland, Sweden and Denmark actually performed the Presidency role. Which of the competing interpretations is most appropriate? Was the Presidency role performed differently by the three countries? Our main finding is that the Presidency generally functioned as an amplifier during the Nordic presidencies. There are, however, interesting differences between the three states, Denmark being the least constrained in using the Presidency to further national interests whereas Finland was most anxious not to violate norms of impartiality and neutrality, even in cases where such behaviour ran contrary to national interests.

Introduction

How did the three Nordic European Union (EU) member states approach their periods at the top of the EU decision-making system, as holders of the Council Presidency? For six months each, Finland, Sweden and Denmark have occupied the chair of the Council system, a position accompanied by a variety of partly contradictory expectations: of acting as manager, leader, broker and promoter of national and European interests. In what ways did the three countries choose to perform this role?

Two radically different predictions can be found in the literature. According to one interpretation, the Presidency gives the incumbent a chance to push forward national issue-area concerns linked to traditional national priorities. Chairs are expected to use their formal power position to shape the

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agenda and to influence the decision-making process with the aim of promoting these national interests. Therefore, the position functions as an *amplifier*; it strengthens the always existing tendency to promote national concerns. In a second interpretation, the Presidency role is inextricably linked to notions of neutrality and impartiality. Small states not least are therefore expected to subordinate their national material interests to the benefit of common European concerns. Thus, the Presidency functions as a *silencer*; it puts a temporary lid on efforts to promote self-interests and instead encourages a European policy orientation. In actual EU policy making, both effects of the Presidency may be in play at the same time. It is still, however, analytically possible and desirable to keep them apart.

Denmark, Finland and Sweden are of particular interest in this respect, owing both to their similar characteristics and to their differences. Denmark and Sweden have a reputation as 'reluctant Europeans', critical of European federal aspirations. Finland and Sweden are militarily non-aligned, and Denmark has opt-outs in several key areas of EU policy. All three are well known to promote a 'Nordic model' as regards welfare and labour-market policies, environment, foreign assistance and democratic openness. These factors would all lead us to expect a strong Nordic desire to promote national issue-area concerns, thus using the Presidency as an amplifier. On the other hand, the Nordic EU members share the reputation of 'honest brokers' and 'faithful implementers', carefully following norms and rules. They are all, but to various degrees, seen to be concerned about their European credentials. These characteristics would make us expect the Nordic countries to follow Presidency norms and thus be 'silenced' by the position of the chair.

In this article, we analyse the ways in which Finland, Sweden and Denmark actually performed the Presidency role.¹ Which of the two existing interpretations is most appropriate: did the Presidency function primarily as an amplifier or as a silencer? Do the three countries differ in this regard? If so, why?

Our main findings suggest that the Presidency generally functioned as an amplifier during the three Nordic Presidencies. There are, however, interesting differences between the three states, Denmark being the least constrained in using the Presidency to further national interests whereas Finland was most anxious not to violate norms of impartiality and neutrality, even in cases where such behaviour ran contrary to national interests.

We start by explaining in more detail the arguments found in relevant literature on the effects of the Presidency position. Thereafter, we describe and analyse how the three countries performed the political Presidency tasks: agenda management, brokerage and external representation. We conclude by summarizing the similarities and differences between the three Nordic Presidencies and isolating the implications of the article for ongoing debates in EU and international relations (IR) research.

Competing Expectations

In the system currently in operation, the rotating Presidency of the EU Council of Ministers is held by each member state for a six-month period. During this time, the Presidency leads the European Council and chairs all meetings of the different Council constellations, as well as all meetings in Coreper and in working parties under the Council. The Presidency is expected not only to prepare and set the agenda for the meetings but also to construct compromise proposals and, in general, to try to foster conditions for effective decision making. It is also required to act as a representative of the Council, both internally (e.g. in relations with the European Parliament) and externally (towards actors in the state system). The Presidency can therefore be said to fulfil three major tasks: as agenda manager, as broker and as representative (Tallberg 2001a; cf. Hayes-Renshaw & Wallace 1997). These tasks are analytically distinct but may be intertwined and blurred empirically.

Finland assumed the Presidency in the autumn of 1999 and Sweden did so in the spring of 2001. Both were debutantes in the office. Denmark, in contrast, had previous experience when it took over the position in the autumn of 2002. As is true for all Presidencies, the agendas for their terms in office were already to a large extent set by external circumstances and long-term commitments. Nevertheless they all had opportunities to influence what to prioritize and discuss during their stint at the helm. They partly faced the same challenges, including the forthcoming enlargement and the constitutional debate on the future of Europe, but each also had to deal with specific, event-driven problems (the war in Chechnya, mad-cow disease, the Iraqi question, etc.).

Chairs in international organizations or conferences are, in general, expected to perform their duties in special ways. This also holds true for the EU Council Presidency. However, a perusal of relevant international relations and EU literature makes eminently clear that such expectations vary. Two very different and competing interpretations of the effect of holding the Presidency can be distinguished. The arguments found refer to (a) expectations that relate to general, system-level features, (b) expectations of the EU Presidency as such, based on its particular characteristics and on previous historical experiences and (c) expectations that are linked to specific characteristics of the Nordic EU members, individually or collectively.

The Presidency as Amplifier

According to a first line of argument, states are apt to use formal power positions to protect or enhance their national interests. They would therefore utilize the opportunities given by a temporary power position, like the EU

Presidency, to intensify their pursuit of particular issue-area concerns. The office would then be used as an amplifier, or megaphone, that increases the chances of being listened to and of exerting influence. Traditional realist and liberal IR theory argues that sovereign states are driven by national interests, primarily related to security or economic welfare (Baldwin 1993). When states cooperate they do so because they cannot reach their national goals unilaterally. States are seen as opportunistic actors and would thus be expected to exploit privileged power platforms, such as the chair, to further their national aspirations. Constructivist theory links interests to national identities and argues that ideational frameworks may constitute perceived interests that states pursue. Although constructivists thus widen the notion of 'national interest' to include ideational self-interests, they still expect state actors to use a formal power position as an amplifier to promote such interests.

In the EU context, it is easy to establish empirically that the office of the Presidency has in fact been used as a platform for the promotion of national interests. Holders of the Presidency have regularly engaged in activities that are difficult to explain in terms other than self-interest. Examples abound in different areas. In constitutional issues, the French insistence on equality with Germany and quite open (some would say arrogant) defence of great power interests at the Nice summit of December 2000 is an oft-cited illustration, as is the Belgian preoccupation with the future of Europe debate. Geographical priorities also tend to have a visible impact. Thus, Spain and Portugal have stressed relations with the Mediterranean countries and with Latin America (Morata & Fernández 2003), France has emphasized relations with its former colonies in aid and trade relations, and Belgium has focused on Central Africa (Kerremans & Drieskens 2003). When it comes to material interests, Great Britain's work on the Single European Market may be given as an example. This empirical picture suggests that exploiting the chair to defend major interests or to promote national pet projects has become expected behaviour, built into the system as a result of praxis (Tallberg 2003).

The Nordic member states, because of their particular characteristics, may arguably be especially prone to using the Presidency as a megaphone to promote ideas and norms. First, the Presidency can be translated into normative power through the opportunity to launch and promote novel policy ideas or ideational frameworks and can thus be claimed to be a tool especially well suited to smaller states – like the Nordic countries – which lack traditional power resources (Bengtsson 2003). The Nordic states, in particular Sweden and Denmark, are proud of their welfare ideologies, broadly defined, and have a long tradition of trying to export the 'Nordic model' to other societies (Mörth & Sundelius 1995). Nordic experiences and policies regarding social welfare systems, labour market policy, environmental protection, foreign aid and peace building – to mention just a few elements of the model – are seen

as ideals to be adopted by the EU (Miles 2000). Second, the Presidency provides a platform from which visions about the future construction of the EU can be articulated. Since the Nordic states embrace visions of the future of Europe that differ from those generally propagated by continental EU members, the Presidency provides an unusual opportunity to influence the direction of the debate. Third, the Presidency also provides opportunities for defensive measures aimed at safeguarding national policy choices. As an example, non-aligned Finland and Sweden could be predicted to promote non-security aspects of the EU's foreign and security policy.

The Presidency as Silencer

Although realist theory claims that all states are driven by self-interests, there is in this tradition also a tendency to emphasize the differences between great powers and small states. The 'small-state literature' (cf. Amstrup 1976; Lindell & Persson 1986; Handel 1990) suggests that less powerful states have to be careful and cautious in their external behaviour. Small states are vulnerable and cannot afford to affront the more powerful members of the system. This has consequences also for the behaviour of chairs in multilateral arenas. Whereas great power representatives are expected to take advantage of formal power positions to advance their own interests, chairs from smaller states are expected to behave in a more restrained way, acting as managers or, at most, as honest brokers.

Besides its insistence that national interests are constituted by identities and that states may try to promote their ideational priorities abroad, constructivism also sees state behaviour as constrained by rules and informal norms. As the office of the EU Council Presidency has developed over time, a number of powerful norms regarding Presidency behaviour have evolved. Foremost among these is the almost unchallenged impartiality norm. Scholars and practitioners alike agree that Presidencies should be even handed and neutral in their handling of negotiation processes (Elgström 2003). It is considered inappropriate to use the office to pursue national self-interests; the Presidency should act in favour of the common European good. There is also the widely shared effectiveness norm that states that the prime objective of the chair should be to assure that decisions are made and that the integration process moves forward. As neutrality is believed to be the best way to further mutual concessions and compromise, the two norms that surround the Presidency are closely interlinked. The existence of these norms strongly favours a low-key approach to the office: the Presidency becomes a silencer.

It can, furthermore, be argued that smaller member states are more prone to follow the impartiality norm than are the EU great powers (Hayes-Renshaw & Wallace 1997, 147–48). If France or Spain utilizes the

chair to pursue national priorities, this causes little surprise (but may still evoke fierce criticism). If the Nordic states were to do so, it would create consternation. This is especially true because the Nordic states are also expected to be faithful implementers of EU rules and norms. They have a reputation of carefully following international norms and of criticizing those who do not. Finally, all three countries are supposed to be concerned about their credentials as ‘good Europeans’. Denmark and Sweden are eager to shed historical reputations as ‘reluctant Europeans’ and the Finns have consistently striven to be thought of as a trusted European partner, not least because of their past as a cautious balancer between East and West. These characteristics would make us expect Presidency behaviour in which national priorities are played down and the common European good is emphasized.

In brief, there are strong reasons to believe that the Presidency functions as a silencer, keeping the promotion of national issue-specific concerns separate from the agenda management, brokerage and representation tasks. On the other hand, equally good arguments speak in favour of the Presidency as an amplifier that creates an extra opportunity for member states to promote national interests. In the next three sections, we turn to an empirical scrutiny of actual member state behaviour by comparing the experiences of the Nordic countries.

The Nordic Presidencies as Agenda Managers

All three Nordic Presidencies have made active attempts to shape the EU’s agenda by introducing new concerns, assigning priority to issues already on the agenda and excluding topics from collective debate. Yet these efforts were conditioned by the norms surrounding the Presidency office, which imposed constraints on, especially, Finnish and Swedish agenda management strategies. In addition, unexpected events derailed the Presidencies’ plans on some occasions. Overall, the EU agenda during the Nordic Presidencies was comparatively more oriented toward regional concerns in Northern Europe and Nordic interests and values, such as enlargement, environment and transparency, than during other EU Presidencies.

Finland: Downplaying Short-Term National Priorities

The Finnish government’s agenda-shaping efforts were largely formed by its general aim to use the Presidency as a means to reinforce Finland’s reputation as a good and constructive European partner. The Finnish government began preparing for the Presidency immediately after accession to the EU in 1995. Government officials testify that one of the first and lasting insights of

the preparatory work was the importance of adapting to established EU norms (interviews, Finnish government officials, 15 May and 30 November 2000). Based on contacts with the EU institutions and previous Presidencies, especially the Irish in the second half of 1996, Finnish policy makers concluded that the best strategy for achieving such a reputation was to act as honest brokers and efficient managers, with only limited regard for national interests. The concrete effect of this strategy was that Finland decided to promote few national pet projects compared with many other Presidencies. The Presidency was seen not as a means for enforcing national priorities in the short run, but as a vehicle for achieving a more rewarding EU membership in the long run (Stubb 1999/2000; Tiilikainen 2003).

The Finnish decision to downplay national policy priorities was reflected in the Presidency's political programme for the autumn of 1999 (Finnish Government 1999). With some exceptions, the issues identified by the Finnish government as key concerns were ongoing political processes, where Finland had no particular vested interests. As one Finnish government official tellingly emphasizes, 'It is not the Presidency that makes the agenda – it is the agenda that makes the Presidency' (Stubb 1999/2000, 52). The most important of these issues were the continuation of the enlargement process, the preparations for the next Intergovernmental Conference (IGC) and institutional reform in the Council, the deepening of cooperation in justice and home affairs, and the development of institutional structures for the evolving European security and defence policy. Yet two issues distinguished Finland's list of priorities from that which any other member state probably would have presented (Tiilikainen 2003; interview, Finnish government official, 30 November 2000). The Finnish government wished to use the Presidency for the promotion of greater transparency, simplicity and efficiency in EU decision making. In addition, Finland planned to use the Presidency to anchor the Finnish Northern Dimension initiative firmly on the EU policy agenda. Reflecting Finnish awareness of the norms surrounding the Presidency office, this initiative had been launched two years before the period in office, in an attempt to deflect criticism that the Presidency was used to promote national pet projects (Haglund 2002).

During and after the Presidency, Finland received extensive praise for its efficient management of the EU agenda. The Finnish government focused its efforts on achieving efficient running of ongoing negotiations and made certain important contributions as a broker, as we shall see in the next section (Martikainen & Tiilikainen 2000). Yet, in terms of shaping the agenda, Finland left a more limited imprint on the EU. Finland's attempts to promote national priorities not only were few in number but also achieved mixed success. The Commission's proposal for a new transparency code for the EU institutions arrived too late for the Finnish Presidency to be able to push this initiative as intended. Instead, Finland centred

its transparency- and efficiency-promoting efforts on areas where the Presidency itself enjoyed discretion, such as effective use of the Presidency website for the publishing of Council agendas (Stubb 1999/2000). The Finnish attempts to favour the Northern Dimension suffered from the war in Chechnya, which reduced other EU governments' interest in cooperation with Russia, as well as an excessively cautious Finnish approach to the promotion of the initiative (Tiilikainen 2003).

Sweden: Promoting the Three Es

In its preparations for the Presidency, the Swedish government de-emphasized the potential for the country at the helm to exploit the office for national pet projects (Elgström & Tallberg 2001; Bjurulf 2003). Two lines of reasoning were particularly prominent. First, the Swedish government referred to the norm of the neutral Presidency and established conceptions about the characteristics of a good and successful Presidency. Central government representatives warned that any attempt to favour exclusively Swedish priorities would lead to a political backlash by provoking negative reactions from other EU governments (Regeringskansliet 2000). Second, the government underlined the risk that unforeseen events in the EU or abroad could distract attention from the priorities set by Sweden for its six months at the helm. Better, then, not to present grandiose ambitions for the Presidency, but to be modest and retain the potential to deliver unexpected results if everything went as planned. The Swedish government's choice to de-emphasize the agenda-shaping potential of the chair is best understood in view of its central aim for the Presidency period: to improve the country's reputation as a reluctant European. Reflecting this line of thinking, Deputy Prime Minister Lena Hjelm-Wallén emphasized, 'The government's foremost ambition and strategy is . . . to conduct a competent, efficient, and result-oriented presidency that moves the common concerns on the EU's agenda forward' (Sveriges Riksdag 1998/1999, 1).

Yet it was equally clear that the Swedish government was not prepared to neglect this opportunity to leave Sweden's mark on the EU. Swedish priorities for the Presidency were developed from 1999 onwards (Elgström & Tallberg 2001). The first list was broad and included six main priorities – environment, employment, transparency, equality between the sexes, EU enlargement and relations with Russia – as well as a number of subordinate priorities, such as consumer protection, free trade and conflict prevention. All these issues were well-known Swedish concerns that the government had promoted since accession in 1995. But they were also issues that, one way or the other, were on the broad European agenda, which reduced the risk that Swedish agenda shaping would meet criticism from other EU governments. For media purposes, the government later began to use the slogan of the

'three Es' – enlargement, employment, environment – when speaking of its priorities, even if the actual list of prioritized issues was longer. Notably absent from this list was the debate on the future of Europe, which – tellingly – was relegated to the very last paragraph of the programme for the Swedish Presidency (Swedish Government 2001).

The Swedish government's prioritization of issues left a clear mark on the European political agenda during the first six months of 2001 (Tallberg 2001b). One contributing reason was the unusual absence of unexpected events that could have derailed the Swedish plans (Ruin 2002, 106–14). The enlargement negotiations were conducted with greater intensity than during the preceding Portuguese and French Presidencies. Environmental issues were placed high on the legislative and political agendas, which resulted in a range of new acts and a new strategy for sustainable development. The European Council's informal meeting in Stockholm was devoted to employment. Sweden accelerated and finished the negotiations on a new transparency code after a year of limited progress during Portuguese and French leadership (Elgström & Bjurulf 2004). Sweden attempted to promote equality between the sexes, though with mixed success. Extra attention was devoted to the EU's relationship with Russia and the evolving northern dimension of the EU's external relations (Haglund 2002). The Swedish government promoted and secured support for a new EU programme for conflict prevention (Björkdahl 2002). By contrast, Sweden kept an exceedingly low profile in the debate on the future of Europe, which it had an explicit mandate to initiate and stimulate. Likewise, it was clear that the Swedish promotion of the civilian aspects of the EU's evolving security and defence policy took place partly at the expense of the development of military crisis management.

Denmark: Making Room for Enlargement Negotiations

The fact that Denmark, unlike Finland and Sweden, had been an EU member for three decades and had held the EU Presidency a number of times clearly influenced the Danish agenda-shaping strategy. Compared with its Nordic neighbours, Denmark was less concerned with the task of establishing a positive reputation among the other EU members. The main goal of the Presidency was to produce policy results that were good for Denmark – and for Europe. Yet, if this could be achieved, then two positive side effects might follow. It could help the EU-positive Danish government under Anders Fogh Rasmussen to convince the more Eurosceptic Danish population of the merits of full participation in European integration and of giving up the Danish opt-outs. In addition, the achievement of Denmark's main policy goal – the conclusion of the enlargement negotiations – could help improve Denmark's reputation as the 'problem child' of European cooperation.

Although the preparations for the Presidency had been going on for a couple of years, the final prioritization of issues took place only shortly before Denmark took over the chair. The new Danish coalition government entered office in the late autumn of 2001. The political programme for the Presidency carried the distinct mark of Danish political priorities (Danish Government 2002). Few issues were entirely new; instead, it was mainly a question of assigning priority to the issues on the agenda. The Danish priority *par excellence* was the conclusion of the enlargement negotiations. Enlargement had been Denmark's top priority in the EU since 1989 and it was one of the few issues where Denmark was at the political forefront (Friis 2003). Further down on the list of priorities were cooperation on justice and home affairs, sustainable development, food safety and the EU's global responsibilities. The political mark of the Danish liberal-conservative government was most evident in the prioritization of concerns under these general headings. Compared with what other Presidencies might have emphasized, the Danish government paid particular attention to the promotion of a more effective asylum and immigration policy, job creation through liberalization and deregulation, stronger transatlantic ties and greater transparency in EU decision making. Conversely, the Danish government gave lower priority to the debate on the future European institutional architecture than many EU governments would have done.

The Danish government largely managed to pursue the agenda it had planned and hoped for. As we explain in later sections of this article, the Danish focused most of their efforts on the enlargement negotiations, with considerable success. The prioritization of the enlargement negotiations carried concrete implications for the general handling of the EU agenda during these six months. For instance, Prime Minister Rasmussen chose to devote the European Council's two meetings exclusively to the completion of the negotiations and made sure that the summits were not used to craft compromises on other, less important, concerns. Even if the government made an effort to keep things floating in most areas, it is evident that certain issues were put on the backburner, among them the convention on the future of Europe (Friis 2003). Beyond enlargement, the Danish government succeeded in its intentions to achieve progress on asylum and immigration, through the conclusion of the Dublin II package, and to make the EU a degree more transparent during these six months, through open Council debates and the posting of documents on the Presidency website (Rasmussen 2002; Danish Government 2003). The Danish Presidency was comparatively untroubled by unexpected events that threatened to derail the agenda. One priority that did suffer was the intention to strengthen the EU's transatlantic ties, where movement was limited, if not negative, because of tension over the appropriate way of handling Iraq and US pressure on European states not to extradite US citizens to the International Criminal Court.

The Nordic Presidencies as Brokers

As expected of small-state Presidencies, the three Nordic member states all took the brokerage role very seriously. They used the Presidency's privileged access to information and its ability to control procedure (Tallberg forthcoming 2004) to unlock incompatible negotiating positions. After their Presidencies they all received praise for reaching successful compromise solutions for difficult dossiers. At the same time, there were visible differences in how they approached situations where Presidency norms came into conflict with national issue-area concerns. Although they all stressed their neutrality – in accordance with Presidency norms – and in most instances also in reality acted as impartial mediators, they put different emphasis on these norms when national interests were at stake.

Finland: Ambitious but Low Key

In the Finnish case, many factors coincided to call for an ambitious but low-key approach to the mediator role. As a result of the Cold War, Finland had moved from being a cautious, neutral small state in the shadow of the Soviet Union to being a committed European. Not least for security reasons, Finland wholeheartedly embraced the EU, its common values and common policies (Tiilikainen 2003). During the Presidency it was considered of utmost importance to adhere to existing EU norms – including effectiveness and impartiality. Furthermore, the Finnish tradition of, and pride in, acting as a neutral mediator on the world stage also set an example for Finnish diplomats in the EU context. 'Therefore, both national characteristics and prevailing Presidency norms converged to encourage a Finnish focus on the roles of broker and bureaucrat' (Tiilikainen 2003, 188).

In general, the Finns deliberately tried to act as an honest broker, basing their behaviour on established norms and expectations for a good Presidency. This is evidenced by their track record in a number of empirical cases (Peltonen 2000; Tiilikainen 2000; 2003; Martikainen & Tiilikainen 2000). When preparing the decision to approve Turkey's candidate status, Finland emphasized its neutrality and its lack of self-interest in the issue (which was not even included in the programme for the Presidency) and kept a low profile in an attempt to prevent the issue from becoming politicized. This proved to be a successful strategy: Finland was generally perceived to have significantly contributed to the final decision to confirm Turkey's status as a candidate for EU membership (Peltonen 2000). The creation of the EU's crisis management capacity is another example where Finland assumed the position of arbitrator. On this issue Finland was one of the initiators of incorporating the Petersberg tasks in the EU's treaties and was therefore keen on getting a positive result. This required some political flexibility, since concessions

were needed to placate both those who saw the creation of EU military resources and institutions as important steps forward towards a European defence dimension, and those who were sceptical about such a development (Tiilikainen 2003, 189–91). Finland's flexibility, combined with its credibility as a compromise maker, made it possible for its negotiators to construct a package that satisfied all parties.

In some cases, the Finnish interest in being a good European even implied a retreat from more immediate national issue-based interests. A study conducted on the Finnish Presidency (Martikainen & Tiilikainen 2000) points to a number of issues where Finland distanced itself from its professed national objectives. The Lomé Treaty negotiations, the enlargement process and the IGC agenda-setting process are three examples. Finnish officials have even been described as 'immediately laying themselves flat on the ground' as soon as they thought they detected a majority opposition to Finnish standpoints (interviews, Finnish government officials, 15 May and 30 November 2000).

To act as a sometimes self-effacing broker was part of a long-term Finnish policy to be recognized as a responsible member state. Even if the effect of the Presidency was cautious and conciliatory Finnish behaviour on dossiers where Finland had a clear short-term material interest, the Finnish government simultaneously used the Presidency to promote its long-term national objective of tying Finland closer to the core of the EU.

Sweden: Pursuing Broad Consensus

As in the Finnish case, Swedish identity and tradition combined with Presidency norms to prescribe an active mediator role. The Swedish small-state self-image includes being a skilled and well-reputed international mediator. Domestic political history has emphasized the positive aspects of compromises and is claimed to have created a 'consensus culture' (Lewin 1998). Sweden's neutral security policy strengthened its image as an impartial conflict-solving third party (Bjurulf 2003, 248).

Officials in Brussels witness that Swedish negotiators generally tried hard to achieve broad consensus agreements (interview, European Parliament official, 2 July 2001). Swedish officials were known to let all parties express their standpoints and their reservations, and to make a serious attempt to find integrative solutions that everyone could accept. This was often applauded, but also criticized for being time consuming and ineffective. In fact, the Swedish government is claimed to have realized this danger towards the middle of the six-month period, when it issued a directive stressing the need for more efficient decision making to improve the chances of reaching agreements during the Swedish Presidency (interviews, Swedish government officials, 4 July and 21 August 2001). The wish to be seen as a successful Presidency thus influenced Swedish brokerage strategies.

The conscious decision to focus on issues where Swedish and European agendas coincided helped Sweden to escape situations where it had to concede on national interests in order to construct agreement. In general, Sweden was seen as successful in playing the part of impartial mediator. The Presidency was credited with bringing a number of difficult dossiers to conclusion, both in the Council and in conciliation negotiations with the European Parliament. In the areas of conflict prevention and enlargement – both high-priority issues for Sweden – it received praise for its handling of the intricate bargaining processes.

However, in one case – public access to EU documents – Sweden was accused of openly advocating its own national interests. This was denied by the Swedish authorities, who averred that they acted solely in the interest of the EU as a whole (Bjurulf 2003, 238–43). Transparency is a cornerstone of the Swedish democracy model, anchored in the Swedish constitution since 1766, which made it extremely difficult and sensitive for Swedish officials to make major concessions on this issue. Being in a minority in the Council, Swedish negotiators had to balance their national priority against the expectation that the Presidency was not supposed to actively advocate a minority position. Fortunately for Sweden, it was able to use the openness-oriented European Parliament as a lever to achieve a compromise solution that took major Swedish interests into account (Bjurulf & Elgström 2004). Nevertheless, the handling of the transparency negotiations seems to have had some negative consequences for Sweden's reputation (interviews, German government officials, 3 July 2001).

To conclude, Sweden utilized its Presidency to push forward several long-standing key national concerns by brokering compromise agreements. It rarely had to sacrifice national positions in order to do so. In the enlargement negotiations, Sweden even made use of its official leadership position to press other states for concessions with regard to formulations at the Göteborg summit. Other member states gave in, following the norm that Presidencies should be allowed to gain some victories during their time at the helm: this is in the long run beneficial to all member states.

Denmark: Pragmatic and Issue Focused

The Danish government's decision to focus its Presidency so heavily on completing the enlargement process also meant that its skills as a broker were tested rigorously in this context. Luckily for Denmark, most observers have found that the Danish Presidency was largely successful in this endeavour (Friis 2003; Miles 2003; see also Danish Government [2003, 3–4] for Denmark's own evaluation). Although other actors and other factors (not least the Franco-German bilateral deal on the future budget and the 'yes' in the second Irish referendum) contributed to the positive outcome in Copenhagen,

Danish strategies and tactics are claimed to have left a considerable imprint on the Copenhagen agreement (Friis 2003). First, Denmark demonstrated diplomatic skill at the Brussels summit where agreement was reached on the financial frames for enlargement (Miles 2003). Second, it chose to frame the Copenhagen summit as a ‘now or never’ occasion. If no compromise were agreed upon, the risk of postponing enlargement for a very long time period would be imminent, Denmark argued. This put the other actors under considerable pressure. Third, Danish leaders performed a risky but eventually successful move when in Copenhagen they unilaterally promised the candidate countries a sweetener in the form of a slight increase in financial support from the EU. Fourth, the Presidency sequenced the accession talks in such a way that reluctant applicants were put under pressure to conform to previous decisions. The Danish Presidency thus passed its litmus test as a skilful broker with honours. In doing so, it also reached its main political and symbolic goals for the Presidency period.

In other, less publicized fields, the Danish Presidency also performed the brokerage role with ambition. During its mandate, final deals were made on the liberalization of the European electricity market, on a ‘Single European Sky’, on food safety and on the processing of asylum applications. On the other hand, Danish negotiators were not able to secure agreements on an EU-wide patent or on a broad tax package, despite intense efforts. The Danes themselves, however, claimed that they had paved the way for subsequent decisions (under the Greek Presidency) by presenting carefully conceived compromise proposals (Danish Government 2003, 16–17).

Danish brokerage efforts have been characterized as being marked by pragmatism and a consensus-building spirit (Miles 2003). The argument is that Danish politicians framed negotiations in terms of ‘technical issues’ rather than as matters of vision. Their goal was to ‘get the new EU working’ rather than to ‘debate the federal Europe’ (Miles 2003). The decision to concentrate on enlargement, which was simultaneously the highest-priority Danish interest and a top EU priority, made it relatively less important for Denmark to ensure positive results in less prioritized areas of national concern. This made an overall consensus approach possible.

The Danish opt-outs in security, monetary, and justice and home affairs policy seem, from a brokerage perspective, to have been both a blessing and a curse. It can, according to one perceptive observer, ‘be argued that, albeit to a limited extent, the Danes sub-contracted out policies where they would find it difficult to lead and “consensus-build” around’ (Miles 2003), thereby avoiding issue areas that were sensitive to the country. On the other hand, the opt-outs made it difficult for Denmark to intervene as a mediator in many of the internal spats that darkened the Presidency period.

In brief, the Presidency functioned primarily as a megaphone for Denmark’s long-standing interests in its mediation efforts. Danish negotiators

focused their skills and efforts on brokering a deal on enlargement, the key Danish concern, and did not hesitate to put pressure on fellow members and applicants to reach their goal. We have seen no evidence that Denmark had to pay the ‘price of the Presidency’ and give in on national interests because of the Presidency position.

The Nordic Presidencies as External Representatives

The performances of the three Nordic EU Presidencies in the field of external representation display a number of similarities but also important differences. Enlargement made up the bulk of the agenda and was a continuous element on the external affairs agendas of the Presidencies, but other areas were in focus too. All three did to some degree face the fundamental tension between leadership and brokerage. As will also be evident, institutional linkages and external events played important roles in the framing and outcome of the three periods.

Finland: Displaying Regional Entrepreneurship

Besides being one of the priorities of the Finnish Presidency, external representation and external affairs were also an area of much concrete activity during the Finnish period. The Kosovo crisis provided an exogenous precondition for the Presidency term but did not paralyse the Presidency. Instead, it functioned as a platform from which to direct attention along lines according with Finnish interests. Thus, Finland’s ambition to develop the EU’s civilian crisis management capability is an example of concrete activity completely in line with overall Finnish interests. At the same time, Kosovo and the western Balkans in general illustrate the challenge of representing the Council, both externally and in relation to other EU institutions; in this case, in particular regarding the stability pact and relations with the Commission (Tiilikainen 2003).

Reflecting geopolitical realities and patterns of identification, many of the actions by the Finnish Presidency tended to emphasize the northeastern regional EU perspective, primarily Russia (Arter 2000, 680–81, 691; Haglund 2002; Tiilikainen 2003). Finnish plans circled around a number of related matters: advancing cooperation with Russia in the form of the Common Strategy and the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement, as well as further developing the Northern Dimension initiative launched by the Finns in 1997. Also, a Common Strategy on the Ukraine was prepared during the Finnish term and approved by the Helsinki European Council. Much concrete work thus went towards emphasizing a specific regional aspect of EU foreign

affairs, and the Presidency ran the risk of being criticized for regionalizing external policy. The experience of the Finnish government was, however, that as long as such efforts were of common EU interest the Presidency was not exploiting its elevated position (interviews, Finnish government officials, 11 November and 1 December 2000). All in all, the Northern Dimension initiative and connected policies demonstrate the duality of the representational role: on the one hand the Presidency provides small member states with opportunities for leadership in the external arena; on the other hand, the Presidency is limited by and has to draw its credibility from the positions and attitudes of the other member states. The Northern Dimension issue area furthermore highlights the Presidency's dependence on external events for its room for manoeuvre: the EU-wide criticism of the Russian military campaigns in Chechnya made impossible the Finnish ambitions on EU–Russian relations; the culmination of EU criticism in the form of sanctions decided at the Helsinki European Council marked the extreme point in this regard (Tiilikainen 2003).

Regarding enlargement, the Finns were generally praised for a well-prepared approach during their term and a well-concerted action at the Helsinki summit in December 1999. A number of related measures were coordinated during the Finnish term: advancement of negotiations already underway, agreeing to open negotiations with a number of new candidate countries, and Turkey's recognition as candidate country (Stubb 1999/2000; Tiilikainen 2003). These elements all form part of the overall approach of attempting to further a process of great interest to Finland but not exploited as a strict national interest.

Certain efforts were made in developing the EU's relationship with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), interestingly enough through a non-NATO member. As Stubb points out, this was achieved in close collaboration with and thanks to a considerable contribution from the new High Representative, Javier Solana. Hence it seems that the new institutional measures introduced through the Amsterdam Treaty created a potential for developing the EU's role in world affairs, but also contributed to complicating the question of the division of labour in external representation (Stubb 1999/2000).

In short, Finland maintained a rather high profile in the field of external representation, combining a focus on the all-European interest in enlargement negotiations with specific Finnish interests, such as Turkey, Russia and northeastern Europe. The war in Chechnya, however, made evident the importance of external events and actors in the pursuit of policy outcomes.

Sweden: Proactive through Inter-institutional Linkages

The Swedish approach to external representation bears some resemblance to the Finnish, but there are also significant differences. Regarding the

prioritized area of enlargement negotiations, Sweden received much praise for its efforts in mastering the balance between leading Council work, for example in actively processing common positions, and simultaneously pursuing a credible approach in terms of taking into account the concerns of other member states. In essence, the Swedish approach contained substantive elements of both negotiation progress – the framing of the process – and process commitment – the timetable established at the Göteborg European Council (Bengtsson 2001, 76–80; 2002a, 67–69; interviews, Swedish government officials, 2 July and 21 August 2001; Commission official, 3 July 2001).

A number of geographic priorities stand out as of chief importance during the Swedish term. The Swedish Presidency took an active role in establishing an EU policy towards the Korean peninsula. Sweden deemed itself suitable for this against a general background of interest in the Korean question and being the only EU country with diplomatic representation in North Korea. This is the clearest example during the spring of 2001 of the Presidency forcefully introducing an item to the agenda and taking active steps in a desired direction. The Swedes thus got the European Council in Stockholm in March 2001 to agree to a mission headed by Prime Minister Göran Persson to visit the Korean peninsula; the visit took place in May. By contrast, a more balanced and concerted action was the case when it came to Macedonia and the Middle East, both areas of much work during the Swedish Presidency, but in which the Presidency held a much lower profile (Bengtsson & Strömvik 2001, 160–63).

The Swedish Presidency also had a regional slant in the field of external representation, again relating to Russia and the Northern Dimension. Sweden received some criticism in this area, not for pushing things too far beyond the common interest of the member states, which might have been expected, but rather for its weak and conciliatory stance on Russian aggression in Chechnya (Bengtsson & Strömvik 2001, 159–60; Bengtsson 2002b, 214). It seems here that the Presidency position was not of much help in pursuing priorities; rather the contrary. It is also an example of external events moulding the presidential agenda (Bengtsson 2002b, 217).

One of the more profound impressions of the Swedish Presidency term concerns EU–US relations, which were generally advanced during the Swedish term, both in bilateral perspective and in the institutional relationship between the EU and NATO. Swedish activism in this area is of principal interest given Sweden's status as a small, non-aligned state (Bengtsson & Strömvik 2001, 157–58).

As for Finland, the institutional relationships that the Swedish Presidency engaged in proved to be fundamentally important for the functioning of the Presidency. In the enlargement area, Sweden developed a close relationship with the Commission, which both sides deemed as crucial to the offensive

pursued during the Swedish term (Bengtsson 2001, 81; 2002a, 70; interviews, Swedish government official, 2 July 2001, Commission official, 3 July 2001). In parallel, in the broader external relations field, the relationship between Swedish Foreign Minister Anna Lindh and High Representative Javier Solana, and also Commissioner Chris Patten, is generally quoted as a factor contributing to the Swedish impact in the field (see further Bengtsson & Strömvik 2001, 164–65; interview, Swedish government official, 21 August 2001). The fruitful relationship with these institutions and representatives is especially interesting against the background of the hitherto hesitant and intergovernmental approach of the Swedish government.

In brief, the Swedish Presidency can be characterized as rather active, both in the enlargement field and in inter-institutional dealings regarding a number of issue areas. Sweden managed to use the Presidency as a platform for furthering national interests without stepping on too many toes in the process. The Presidency was also a good illustration of Sweden's reorientation from hesitant to proactive player in the field of security affairs broadly understood, despite its continued status as a non-aligned country.

Denmark: Focusing on the Enlargement Triumph

The Danish efforts in the field of external representation were to a very large degree directed to the issue of enlargement. The characterization of the Danish presidency in terms of three Es – enlargement, enlargement, enlargement – illustrates that efforts in the field of external representation were overwhelmingly geared in one direction (Friis 2003; Miles 2003). In terms of administrative capacity, the primary focus on enlargement, and the downplaying of other issues, meant that Denmark was able to coordinate and to some degree control the enlargement process despite its smallness and limited material resources. Thus, much of its efforts went into the political framing and technical sequencing of negotiations, both within the circle of member states about common positions and vis-à-vis the candidate countries (Danish Government 2003, 7; Friis 2003; Rasmussen 2003b; Miles 2003). It should, however, also be noted that Denmark, like the other Presidencies in question here, relied on other EU institutions, especially the Commission, to accomplish this task (Rasmussen 2002; Danish Government 2003, 8; Miles 2003).

Enlargement had been a top priority for Denmark ever since the end of the Cold War; the 2002 Presidency thus constituted an opportunity to work hard on an issue that had been a national priority for a long time. This is an obvious example of a case where national priorities clearly coincide with an all-European general interest. It was furthermore of symbolic interest to the Danes to complete accession negotiations, since it would mean enlargement had come full circle from the European Council in Copenhagen 1993, where

the accession process formally started, to the European Council in Copenhagen 2002, where negotiations with ten candidate countries were completed (Rasmussen 2003a).

In parallel with the process up to and during the Copenhagen summit in December 2002, Denmark coordinated work *vis-à-vis* Romania, Bulgaria and Turkey, issues that the Danes perceived as necessary to balance the big-bang approach of the successful negotiations (Rasmussen 2003a; 2003b). This highlights the Presidency's potential for directing the work in external relations, but it also underscores that the Presidency is in dire need of Commission information, support and frame of reference. For example, it can be argued that the Progress Reports from the Commission facilitated the Danish activity and behaviour in this field.

Denmark also had regional priorities other than enlargement, primarily regarding Russia. Against the general background ambition of developing the Northern Dimension, the specific but politically difficult and symbolically fundamental issue of Kaliningrad's status and transit arrangements was resolved during the Danish term (Danish Government 2003, 22; Møller 2003; Rasmussen 2003b). Both the Kaliningrad issue and the management of problems related to Chechnya are illustrations of the Danish Presidency leading the EU in external relations (Møller 2003).

In addition to enlargement, the Middle East was on the agenda in various guises during the Danish term. On the one hand, Denmark continued EU work in the area of Israeli–Palestinian relations and presented a peace plan aimed at establishing an independent Palestinian state in 2005. The plan was accepted by EU foreign ministers, but was hard to sell to Israel (*Dagens Nyheter*, 31 August 2002; *European Voice*, 12 September 2002; Danish Government 2003, 21). The principal interest of the process is procedural, since it involved Danish shuttle diplomacy in the Middle East as an attempt by the EU to fill the void left by American non-engagement, and symbolic, in illustrating the problems of winning international recognition for EU efforts in world affairs (specifically in this case Israeli disapproval and preference for American mediation).

The rapid unfolding of events in Iraq started to appear on the EU agenda during the autumn. Here positions among member states quickly became conflicting, which left the Danes little room for manoeuvre and made common positions among EU member states hard to establish in rapidly unfolding circumstances. This example thus highlights that the Presidency is especially dependent on outside events and actors in the field of external representation.

All in all, the Danes' proactive approach to enlargement – very clearly *the* national interest – was successful in terms of bringing the desired results. The longer-term effect on Denmark's reputation remains to be determined, however. In other areas of external representation, the Danish approach was

considerably more moderate and although regional priorities did exist the overall picture was clearly more all-European in character.

Conclusion

The Presidency periods of Finland, Sweden and Denmark offered the governments of these countries a unique opportunity to influence the development of politics in the EU. Would the three Nordic member states exploit the potential of the Presidency to promote national interests and ideals, or would they rather downplay national concerns and be guided by norms of neutrality and impartiality? Would the Presidency function as an amplifier, strengthening the impact of the Nordic countries on the EU, or as a silencer, muting the voices of the Nordic countries in EU politics? The purpose of this article has been to seek an empirical answer to this general question through a comparison of Finland's, Sweden's and Denmark's performance of the Presidency's agenda management, brokerage and external representation tasks. Our conclusions carry implications for understanding the Nordic countries' respective national strategies in the EU and for research on the influence of negotiation chairs in the EU and international cooperation.

The analysis yields a surprisingly clear verdict in favour of the Presidency office as an amplifier of the Nordic governments' promotion of national ideals and interests. As opposed to a number of Presidencies in the past, none of the Nordic Presidencies has come to be remembered among policy makers or the wider public for the prioritization of national over European concerns. Yet, when scrutinized systematically, the Nordic governments' performance lends more support to the image of the EU Presidency as an amplifier than to the description of it as a silencer. Sweden and Denmark actively used their discretion within the agenda management task to structure EU politics, assigning particular priority to certain policy areas rather than others, whereas Finland took a more low-key approach and left a more limited imprint on the agenda. The analysis of the brokerage task reveals a more careful approach from all three countries, best explained by the strong honest-broker norm; but Denmark and Sweden did not hesitate to stray from the path of impartiality when key national concerns were at stake. In the task of external representation, each of the three governments placed special emphasis on the development and promotion of Nordic regional concerns, notably the Northern Dimension initiative and the enlargement of the EU. Contrary to what parts of the literature on European integration and small-state behaviour would suggest, Finland, Sweden and Denmark did not abstain from the opportunity to make the EU slightly more Nordic.

That said, the analysis also demonstrates that there were notable and interesting differences in the approaches chosen by the governments of the

three Nordic EU states. Denmark was least hesitant about using the Presidency to strengthen the promotion of national concerns, whereas Sweden occupied an in-between position and Finland was most constrained in its actions by the norms of neutrality and impartiality. One potential explanation of this pattern, which accords well with broader comparative observations (Elgström 2003), points to the potential for new member states to use the Presidency as a means of demonstrating their credentials as European partners. The desire to gain a favourable reputation was present in the Swedish case, but a dominant factor in the Finnish case, where the Presidency was an integral part of the Finnish long-term strategy to win a place among the EU's core states. The Finnish government's particular approach was successful insofar as it generated the desired reputation as one of the most constructive and efficient Presidencies ever. However, this was achieved at the expense of substantive policy interests. In that regard, Denmark and Sweden were more successful in safeguarding their short-term national interests. What unites the three Nordic Presidencies is the extent to which the EU Presidency served as a vehicle for national political strategies, whether short or long term in orientation.

In a broader theoretical perspective, this article suggests that the office of the chair constitutes a power platform with political consequences. The chair as an institution carries implications both for the efficiency of negotiations – the extent to which the parties can reach an agreement that does not leave gains on the table – and for the distributional consequences of negotiations – the question of who gains more or less from an agreement. As we have demonstrated in this article, the Nordic EU members fulfilled chair tasks that enabled member states to negotiate on the basis of well-structured agendas, to uncover underlying zones of agreement and to present coordinated positions *vis-à-vis* third parties. At the same time, the Nordic EU governments used the Presidency for national political purposes.

This observation speaks to ongoing debates in the study of EU and international politics. It lends support to the intergovernmentalist claim in EU studies by specifying perhaps the most important institutional mechanism through which EU governments reach efficient agreements without the involvement of supranational institutions (Moravcsik 1998). Through the rotating Presidency, governments take turns in fulfilling tasks that facilitate intergovernmental decision making, simultaneously sharing the political benefits of this office. The notion of the chair as a political platform further suggests that conventional views of power in international negotiations would profit from an integration of alternative sources of bargaining strength. Whereas standard accounts of bargaining power stress the parties' alternatives to the negotiated agreement (Fisher & Ury 1981; Lax & Sebenius 1986), this article suggests why international agreements are likely to be tilted toward the interests of those states that control the political platform of the chair.

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NOTE

1. The empirical basis for the analysis consists of interviews, government speeches and publications and secondary sources concerned with the Nordic Presidencies (such as symposium reports and academic reviews). As part of the research project 'Comparing EU Council Presidencies', in-depth interviews were carried out with officials of the EU institutions and of the Finnish and the Swedish administrations. One part of these semi-structured interviews concerned the interviewees' experiences of the Nordic Presidencies. A list of interviewees follows:

Anders Bjurner, Swedish Permanent Representation (Brussels), 3 July 2001
Hans Brunmayr, Council Secretariat, 8 February 2001
Christian Danielsson, Swedish Permanent Representation (Brussels), 2 July 2001
Lars Danielsson, Swedish Prime Minister's Office, 21 August 2001
Ari Heikkinen, Finnish Foreign Ministry, 11 November 2000
Saritau Kaukaouja, Finnish Permanent Representation (Brussels), 2 July 2001
Marku Keinänen, Finnish Prime Minister's Office, 30 November 2000
Christian Leffler, European Commission, 3 July 2001
Gunnar Lund, Swedish Permanent Representation (Brussels), 4 July 2001
Lars-Erik Lundin, European Commission, 3 July 2001
Päiui Luostarinen, Finnish Foreign Ministry, 1 December 2000
Jan R. Olsson, Swedish Permanent Representation (Brussels), 2 July 2001
Antti Peltomäki, Finnish Prime Minister's Office, 30 November 2000
Michael Shackleton, European Parliament, 2 July 2001
Martin Westlake, European Commission, 3 July 2001

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