



**MALMÖ UNIVERSITY**  
FACULTY OF CULTURE  
AND SOCIETY

# Small EU Member States at the Helm of the Council Presidency

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Opportunities and Challenges of the Estonian Presidency in 2018

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## **Abstract**

How do small EU member states approach the Council Presidency: is the Presidency a silencer or an amplifier of national interests? Moreover, what challenges and opportunities do a small state face in the Presidency? In this comparative case study, I analysed the approach, challenges and opportunities of three member states in relation to the chairmanship: Denmark, an old and experienced member state and its Presidency in 2012; Latvia, a relatively new member state and first time Presidency in 2015; and finally Estonia, another new member, and its upcoming first time Presidency in 2018.

My main findings indicate that the Presidency functions as a silencer for first time holders of the Presidency; and as an amplifier for Denmark, which efficiently used cognitive power resources to tilt the Presidency agenda in its favour, while remaining an honest broker. The Presidency offers many opportunities, among which the most important is the transformation of the public administration. Moreover, to showcase the EU to the incumbent state, and vice versa, is important for the integration process. It is also essential for the identity formation of small states to prove their capacity within the union. Finally, I established that a close relationship with the Commission is an important leadership quality and power resource for small states. For small states, the Presidency represents a challenge for the public administration, while unforeseeable events can entirely change the course of the Presidency. Furthermore, the domestic as well as the European political landscape can negatively influence the decision-making.

**Key words:** Council Presidency, EU, small states, cognitive power resources, identity, Denmark, Latvia, Estonia.

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# 1 Introduction

## 1.1 Background

In January 2018, Estonia will hold the European Union's (EU) rotating Council Presidency (hereinafter the *Presidency*) for the first time. For a small EU member state, the Presidency can represent a great trial. Therefore, Estonia, which has been an independent state for almost 25 years and an EU member since 2004, will be faced with many challenges. Nevertheless, beside the many difficulties that the Presidency represents, it also provides incumbent states with several opportunities. Needless to say, the Presidency is undoubtedly an important EU institution and therefore comes with a great responsibility.

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

The Presidency has a significant position in the EU's decision-making processes, where small states often have limited power. However, holding the Presidency offers them rare opportunities to shape the EU's agenda in their favour, as well as strengthen their position within the union (Thorhallsson and Wivel 2006, p.662). Nevertheless, some scholars argue that the Presidency is a position with no power and that the incumbent state has to remain neutral during its Presidency (Bengtsson et al. 2004, p. 311-312).

## 1.2 Problem Statement

On the one hand, there are researchers who claim that the Presidency represents a good opportunity, especially for small member states, to maximize their national interests and shape the EU agenda in their favour. On the other hand, there are scholars who mean that it is unethical to promote domestic interests during the Presidency, as the Presidency holder is

intended to act as a mediator between the member states and serve the common good of the union (Bengtsson et al. 2004, p. 311-312).

With my research, I aim to study how small member states approach the institution: whether they view the Presidency as an opportunity to amplify their national agenda and intensify their pursuit of particular interests; or whether they see it as a silencer of the domestic narrative in order to promote the common European orientation. Therefore, I have chosen to study three small member states, which have both similarities and differences: Denmark, Latvia, and Estonia. They all categorise as small member states, but Denmark is an ‘old’ EU member state, which has held the Presidency seven times, whereas Latvia and Estonia are ‘new’ members, with little and no experience of holding the Presidency.

Therefore, I find it interesting to study the differences between these cases. Denmark is known for using the Presidency as an amplifier, despite of the fact that Nordic states have a reputation of being “honest brokers” (Bengtsson et al. 2004, p. 312). Latvia and Estonia, on the other hand, are all about promoting European interests and doing a good job during their Presidencies, regardless of the fact that these two states could take the opportunity to highlight their individual strengths and characteristics.

### **1.3 Research Aim**

I aim to investigate how small EU member states approach the Presidency and what opportunities and challenges the Presidency represents; while also providing an overview of what Estonia, as a small EU member state, will be faced with during its first Presidency in 2018.

### **1.4 Research Questions**

1. How do small EU member states approach the Council Presidency and what are the opportunities and challenges?
2. What opportunities and challenges will Estonia be faced with during its Council Presidency in 2018?



### 1.5 Thesis Outline

My study begins with a literature review, in which I provide an insight to earlier research, as well as define and explain the key notions in my thesis. Furthermore, I present and argue for my choice of theories. In the third chapter, I describe my methodological choices and how I conducted my empirical observations. Thereafter, I present my empirical material in three consecutive chapters – one for each case: Denmark, Latvia, and Estonia. It is important to note that the empirical material presented in these three chapters represent the opinions of the interviewees (see the interview guides in Appendix A-C), and that they do not contain my own personal views. Chapter 8 is dedicated to my analysis of the empirical material, where I also apply my chosen theories. Moreover, to complement my empirical findings, I include primary official documents to my analysis. I continue my thesis with a discussion of my findings in chapter 9. Finally, I end my thesis by presenting my conclusions, summarizing my contributions, and suggesting topics for future research.

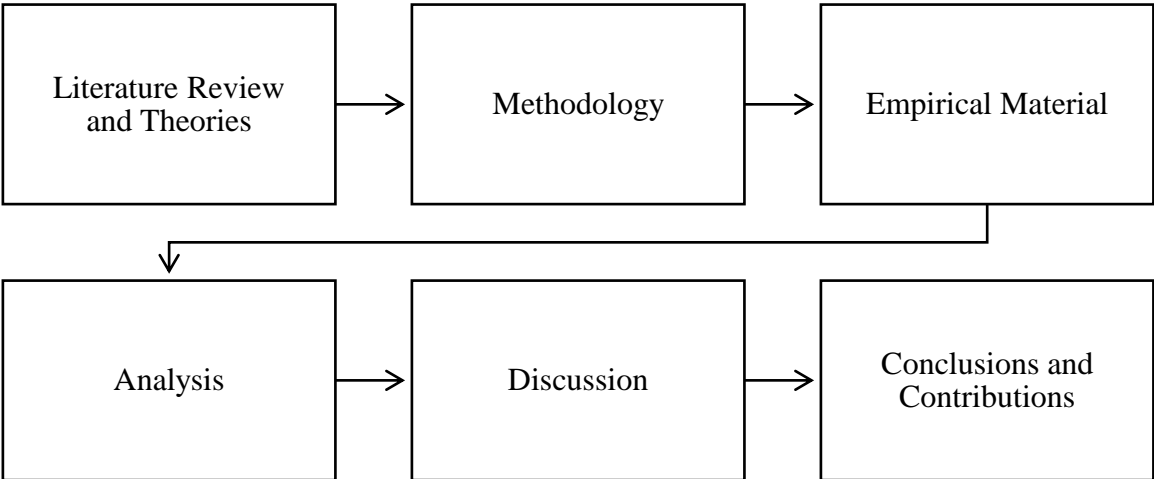


Figure 1 Overview of Thesis Outline.

## **2 Literature Review**

In this chapter, I present a review of earlier research relevant for my study, as well as define what a small state is, how the Presidency has evolved, and how to define a successful Presidency. Moreover, I present two theories that I have applied on my research: the leadership theory, which is my main theory, and elements from social constructivism to supplement the leadership theory.

### **2.1 Earlier Research**

As my research is a combination of two main research fields, namely small states in the EU and the Presidency, I have looked into both fields and beyond. As acknowledged by scholars in the fields, and to my own conclusion, the academic material on both research areas is rather limited and therefore in great need of scholarly debate and further contributions. Moreover, the existing material seems to have many similarities, for example in opinions, as it has mainly been produced by a few principal scholars. In addition, most of the research is concentrated specifically on Nordic countries, which can be explained by the fact that most of the contributing researchers are from Scandinavia.

Thorhallsson and Wivel (2006), who have actively researched the behaviour of small states in the EU, explain the fragmented and diverse academic literature on small states in the EU as follows: “Today, as in the past, the study of small states is plagued by lack of cumulative insights, a paucity of coherent debate and the absence of sufficient outlets for academic publication” (p. 652). They add that there seems to be no agreement among scholars on how to define a small state, what similarities are expected to be found in small states’ foreign policies, and how small states influence international relations (Thorhallsson and Wivel 2006, p. 651). This applies perfectly to my experience of the existing material, as the debate on how to define a small member state is still open and there seems to be no agreement among scholars in view.

The research on small states also varies in different areas. Thorhallsson and Wivel (2006) point out several problem areas, where the research on small states is lacking or is in a need of development. One such area is the theory development in political science in general, and International Relations (IR) in particular, as the existing IR theories are not best suited to explain small states’ behaviour. Hence, there is need of a theory in which variables from

different theories are combined (p. 657). Another such area that requires more attention is the increasing amount of small states in the EU and how that affects the decision-making processes within the Union (p.664). However, significant contributions to the research on small states' influence within the EU have been made by scholars such as Annika Björkdahl (2007), Annica Kronsell (2002), and David Arter (2000), who all have published journal articles on the subject, where they discuss the small member states' ability to influence the EU. They all conclude that in certain policy areas (for example the environment in the case of Sweden, or the Northern Dimension Initiative in the case of Finland), the small states have an upper hand in negotiations (which can be caused by norm advocacy) and can influence the EU's agenda. This brings me to the second research field essential for my study – the Presidency.

Concerning the literature on the Presidency, scholars such as Ole Elgström, Jonas Tallberg, and Rikard Bengtsson have contributed extensively to the academic study of this field. Their study on whether the institution of the Presidency is seen as a silencer or amplifier has been an important contribution to the debate on the role of the Presidency, especially in describing the behaviour of the small EU member states (see Bengtsson et al. 2004). Therefore, their journal article “Silencer or Amplifier? The European Union Presidency and the Nordic States” (2004) has been an essential source of inspiration for my thesis. Moreover, Simone Bunse has studied the Presidency and provided an assessment to the Presidency's border value in relation to small member states as well (see Bunse 2009 or Kirchner 1992). Bunse (2009) has also outlined the essential factors for a successful Presidency, which could help the small states in their performance. In addition, it is important to mention that in the existing literature, there are many aspects of the Presidency that lack research, such as first-time Presidencies held by small and new EU member states (with a few exceptions) (Vandecasteele and Bossuyt 2014, p. 237) as well as research on post Lisbon Treaty Presidencies.

As mentioned above, the role of the Presidency is widely discussed in the field and there are two radically different positions represented in the existing literature. On one hand, scholars claim that the office of the Presidency is the silencer of incumbent's national interests in order to benefit the European common concerns (Bengtsson et al. 2004; also Elgström 2003 or Magnusdottir 2010 or Thomson 2008). This position is closely linked to the notion of neutrality and being an ‘honest broker’. On the other hand, scholars argue that the Presidency is the amplifier of national interests and provides incumbent with position to propagate national interests (Bengtsson et al. 2004; also Bunse 2006; or Thomson 2008; or

Magnusdottir 2010; or Kirchner 1992). This is important for especially small states, which does not have traditional power resources, as it gives them a power platform to shape the agenda and influence the decision-making processes in their favour (Magnusdottir 2010, also Bunse 2006). Nevertheless, in the office of the Presidency, both views can be presented in the same Presidency term. That said, in this study, I lean towards the amplifier view, as I believe that the Presidency provides small states with power position to promote national interests. However, whether or not and to what extent small states (such as Denmark, Estonia, and Latvia) actually use this position will be determinant in the outcome of this study.

## 2.2 Definition of a Small State

As I have mainly focused my research on small EU member states, it is crucial to define the notion of a ‘small state’, which is not as simple as it may seem. Up until the twentieth century and well into it, states were routinely referred to as ‘powers’ in all European languages, and although “this noun is still used for a different category of states, namely ‘great powers’ ... , ‘small powers’ are nowadays simply referred to as ‘small states’ (Neumann and Gstöhl 2006, p.4). As a result of the political landscape in the twentieth century, the number of states increased and all those states that were not considered as great powers were then categorised as ‘small states’; thus, Neumann and Gstöhl (2006) conclude that “Small states are defined by what they are not” (p.6).

The concept of ‘power’ is still rooted in the traditional way of thinking. Goetschel (1998) describes two forms of power – whereof the first one can be called *influence*, and the second one can be called *autonomy* – and claims that small states are defined “as states that suffer both from an influence deficit and an autonomy deficit” (p.14-15). This means that “they have relatively little influence in the international system and their autonomy in the international system is also small” (Goetschel 1998, p.15). Furthermore, in order to best analyse and predict the behaviour of states in the international system, four quantitative variables are traditionally used to define the size of a state: a) the size of its population; b) the size of its territory; c) its gross domestic product (GDP); and finally, d) its military capacity (Thorhallsson 2006, p.7; also Panke 2010a; or Magnusdottir 2010; or Randma-Liiv 2002). Nevertheless, many scholars argue (Thorhallsson being one of them; also Koehane 2006) that in order to observe small states’ behaviour and influence in organisations such as the EU, several other criteria, such as the administrative and diplomatic capacity (Thorhallsson 2006, p. 7; 14; also Magnusdottir 2010, p. 35), need to be taken into account.

However, in my research, I will base my definition of a ‘small state’ on quantitative factors such as the size of the population and the number of votes in the Council of Ministers, which is related to the institutional structure of the EU. I do so, because the size of the population determines the number of votes in the Council of Ministers, which in turn reflects a member states’ power in the EU institutions and therefore emphasizes the important role of the Presidency for a small state. Another reason is that the previous research on small states’ Presidencies mostly uses the quantitative factors to define a small state (see Magnúsdóttir 2010; also Panke 2010a; or Thorhallsson 2006) and I find them relevant for my study.

### **2.3 Evolution of the Presidency**

In the literature, the historical evolution of the Presidency is often described as an accidental process that was shaped by important events in the European Community (EC) history, rather than by treaties. Kirchner (1992) describes the Presidency as “a body which has grown in status more by default than by design” (p.71). In like manner, Helen Wallace concludes that “The Presidency ... represents a combination of reaction to events, the follower not the creator of fashion and convention” (qtd. in Tallberg 2006, p. 43). According to Kirchner (1992), the factors that have influenced the Presidency over time are: a) change in the international environment; b) institutional inadequacies; c) the increased volume of Community activities; d) the technicalities of harmonisation and standardisation; e) and growth of member states from six to twelve (p. 71).

Although, the Presidency’s agenda-management and representation functions have been anchored in formal treaty texts and rules of procedure, the Presidency’s role as broker (or as will be stressed later ‘an honest broker’) evolved over time (Tallberg 2006, p. 57). Originally, the European Commission (hereinafter the *Commission*) has been responsible for taking on brokerage tasks in the EC; however, the Presidency developed into the principal architect of compromise from the late 1960s and onwards (Tallberg 2006, p. 58). The role of the Presidency as broker was a result of the increasing complexity of the EC decision-making processes as well as the increased number of bargaining parties caused by the waves of enlargements (Tallberg 2006, p. 59). Furthermore, the rotation design of the Presidency has been seen as a problem by the member states, as it often caused discontinuity; however, the member states have established mechanisms to ensure the continuity (Tallberg 2006, p. 80) and the recent establishment was implemented with the Lisbon Treaty.

With the Lisbon Treaty coming to force in 2009, significant changes in the role of the rotating Presidency were introduced. “European Council is now chaired by a permanent President and foreign affairs are placed under the chairmanship of the High Representative. Furthermore, the Presidencies are [now] more systematically coordinated within a Trio of Presidencies” (Stellinger in Adler-Nissen, Hassing Nielsen and Sørensen 2012, p. 3). The Treaty has limited the Presidency’s power; however, many tasks and possibilities still remain in the hands of incumbents and the Trio Programme provides and strengthens continuity to the rotating presidency. So, the Presidency has indeed changed significantly since its establishment in the 1950s, when it had no political power, whatsoever (Tallberg 2006, p. 43). Today, the Presidency is the centre of European cooperation as it functions as agenda setter, brokerage, and in core represents the European cooperation (Tallberg 2006, p. 43).

## **2.4 Definition of a Successful Presidency**

On the topic of successful Presidencies, there seems to be lacking a clear distinction between the terms *successful* and *influential* when measuring the performance of a certain Presidency, and whether these concepts go together or are independent from one another (see Vandecasteele and Bossuyt 2014). Also, the absence of a universal measuring scale for a Presidency’s success or influence makes it difficult to determine the nature of the Presidency’s performance, and therefore systematic and comparative research is needed (Vandecasteele and Bossuyt 2014, p. 234). The open and unfinished debate on success vs. influence sets a certain limitation to my research, and thereby I had to make a choice whether to use the term successful or influential when discussing my cases.

A Presidency holder’s success is defined by Van Hecke and Bursen as a state’s “having realized the priorities that were set in the Presidency programme and having coped adequately with unexpected events” (qtd in Vandecasteele and Bossuyt 2014, p. 239). Moreover, other definitions given by scholars of a successful or ‘good’ Presidency emphasize a correct performance of different roles; the legislative output; as well as good coordination with the EU institutions, and thus make it clear that success does not necessarily mean influence (Vandecasteele and Bossuyt 2014, p. 239). Vandecasteele and Bossuyt (2014) claim that “the difference between influence and success approaches can indeed be framed within the national and the EU level” (p. 240), meaning that when the national governments have brought a decision closer to their preferences, the Presidency is measured by influence; whereas, when the decisions are made on a EU level, the Presidency has carried out a

successful job. In this research I have chosen to use the word *successful* when conducting the interviews, without aiming at contributing to the debate on success vs. influence. However, it is still important to keep in mind that this debate is topical in the field, and needs to be acknowledged while assessing the Presidencies of small member states.

## **2.5 Theories**

### **2.5.1 Leadership Theory**

As mentioned above, there are no explicit IR theories to explain the behaviour of small member states in general, or in the Presidency in particular. Therefore, I have chosen to look beyond IR theories in order to provide a solid explanation to how small states approach the Presidency. One of the theories often used in this context is the leadership theory, which has drawn elements from different IR theories (Tallberg 2006, p. 17). Leadership theorists, however, all approach ‘leadership’ differently, by introducing different forms of leadership. Tallberg (2006) presents formal leadership (p. 17); Malnes (1995) introduces directional and problem-solving leadership (p. 91; 96); and Young (1991) describes three types of leadership: structural, entrepreneurial, and intellectual (p. 281). Different approaches have different characteristics, but they all seem to agree on one matter: “leadership ... is a critical determinant of success or failure in the processes of institutional bargaining that dominate efforts to form ... institutional arrangements in international society” (Young 1991, p. 281). Hence, it is my goal to combine these multiple features of leadership and use this combination in order to explain and understand my topic.

Firstly, there are multiple ways to define the term ‘leadership’ provided by several authors, which all culminate in emphasising the common goal of the group. On this matter, for example, Lindberg and Scheingold associate leadership with “... the collective pursuit of some common good or joint purpose” (qtd. in Magnúsdóttir 2010, p. 78), which is also the position of Underdal, who uses the exact same words (qtd. in Malnes 1995, p. 94). Secondly, Malnes (1995) contributes by stressing that “the important thing is that a leader bases his or her initiatives on some conception of collective goals” (p. 94). Finally, to clarify what has been established so far, the following quote sums up my position: “they [states] actively qualify as leadership only if self-interest takes second place to collective goals. If, say, a government tries to improve its bargaining position by all means, it is no leader” (Malnes 1995, p. 94).

However, it would be a mistake to believe that a leader is not motivated by self-interests at all; however, as a leader (in this case an incumbent state), one simply cannot openly prioritize personal benefits (Malnes 1995, p. 95). The office of the chairmanship, or in this case the Presidency, offers the incumbent state a set of power resources, which can, to some extent, be used for own interests (Tallberg 2006, p. 29; 31). Different scholars have called these resources by different names; however, the most commonly used term is ‘cognitive’ power resources. The elements of cognitive resources are: access to privileged information and control over procedures (Tallberg 2006, p. 29); competence, knowledge, and skill (Malnes 1995, p. 95); as well as mediation and bridge-building (Goetschel 1998, p. 16). In addition to the above mentioned resources, a small administration (Randma-Liiv 2002, p. 379; also Magnúsdóttir 2010; or Thorhallsson 2006a) and close relationship with the Commission can also be added to the list of cognitive power resources available for small states (Thorhallsson 2000, p. 123; also Bunse 2009; or Magnúsdóttir 2010). The cognitive powers are very important to small states, as they can be used to compensate for small states’ weakness in quantitative power (military and economical instruments) (Goetschel 1998, p. 16; also Magnúsdóttir 2010) and to take a lead in international negotiations (Magnúsdóttir 2010, p. 79).

To summarize, and to best capture my understanding of leadership, I have chosen to quote a definition given by Magnúsdóttir (2010), who defines the leadership of small states as follows:

The ability of small states to take the lead in international negotiations, often outside the formal negotiation framework, with the help of cognitive power resources such as; their image based on knowledge and/or examples, formal status of authority such as the Council Presidency, administrative advantages and/or close relationship with Commission. (p. 79)

In my analysis and discussion (Chapters 7 and 8), I will present how and to what extent small EU member states, particularly the three cases that I have studied, use their cognitive resources in their Presidencies in order to amplify their national interests or, in contrary, silence them. It is clear that in order to produce agreements among the involved parties and establish an effective international institution, leadership is a necessary means (Young 1991, p. 302-303). It is fair to say, that the goal of all Presidencies is to be as successful and effective (however these concepts are defined) as possible, and therefore, to be a good leader



is essential. The line between being a good leader (an honest broker) and using the Presidency to maximize self-interests is almost invisible and in order to exercise good leadership, cognitive resources have to be used consciously. They can be used both for the common good as well as self-interest, but the key is to find the right balance without losing credibility.

### **2.5.2 Social Constructivism**

Although leadership theorists explain how to be a good leader and an honest broker, while at the same time use cognitive power resources to promote their own interests, they do not explain the role of identity in world politics. Therefore, I have chosen to use some elements of an IR theory – social constructivism – to explain how the EU shapes the identity of small states and how this is represented in the framework of the Presidency. However, it is important to keep in mind that I have intentionally selected only one concept of many within social constructivism – identity – and used it to support my main theory: the leadership theory.

Social constructivism enabled studies in the field of small states in the 1990s with its focus on international norms, identity, and ideas: relative power was no longer the only factor that mattered in international politics. Instead, ideational factors gave new room to small states to maneuver in the foreign policy field (Neumann and Gstöhl 2006, p. 15). As one of the basic tenets of constructivism suggest that “the identities and interests of purposive actors are constructed by these shared ideas rather than given by nature” (Wendt 1999, p. 1), small states are able to socially contract new and more favourable identities in their relationships with other states (Neumann and Gstöhl 2006, p. 15).

Wendt (1999) defines the identity of international actors as “a subjective or unit-level quality, rooted in an actor’s self-understanding” and adds that this understanding often depends on whether or not other actors view an actor in the same way as it perceives itself (p. 224). Thereby, as both an actor’s self-perception and other actors’ view play a significant role in the identity, it can be concluded that “identities are constituted by both internal and external structures” (Wendt 1999, p. 224). This can easily be connected to the framework of the EU, where the member states identify themselves as European only because they are part of the union. However, nations that have entered the union later (such as Estonia and Latvia) still have domestic integration problems and therefore, the Presidency, which provides a platform for identity formation, plays a key role in solving this problem (see Chapter 7).

Furthermore, Wendt (1999) introduces four kinds of identities: personal or corporate, type, role, and collective; and claims that an actor can have multiple identities that are activated selectively depending on the actor's situation (p. 230). Therefore, in the office of the Presidency, the collective European identity is dominant for the incumbent state. However, as identities are arrayed hierarchically depending on an actor's degree of commitment to them, and a great deal depends on how much the identity is threatened by outside factors (Wendt 1999, p. 230-231), it can be explained why some states approach the Presidency differently than others. For Estonia and Latvia, due to their geographical positions and new membership status, the European identity is more important than, for example, Denmark, which throughout its long EU membership history has always kept one foot out the door (proven by its opt-outs and exclusion from different unions). Besides, as small states value institutionalisation more than larger states, they form a type identity with other small states. This type identity is also represented in the Presidency, where small states are often expected to be more successful than larger ones.

## **3 Methodology**

In this chapter, I describe how I conducted my empirical observations and what choices I made regarding the methodology in relation to my research problem, aim, research question, and literature review. To be precise, I argue for the choice of research design, present the case members states, explain my data generation and analysis, as well as discuss the material used for my research.

### **3.1 Research Philosophy**

When conducting research, the ontological and epistemological stance influences the choice of methods as well as theories. Therefore, I cannot avoid to have a research philosophy that explains the nature of the phenomena that I study – the ontology – and how I understand them – the epistemology (Van de Ven 2007). Since it is my aim to understand the role of the Presidency for small states, I rely on an interpretive epistemology, as I concentrate on understanding the social phenomenon (in my case the Presidency) and the actors’ (small EU member states) behaviour (Bryman 2012, p. 28).

Interpretivism is often associated with qualitative studies, such as conducting interviews (Bryman 2012, p. 36), which is the method I have chosen in order to gather empirical material for my study. Although interpretive research methods have been criticised for offering subjective and opinionated judgements (Bryman 2012, p. 36), in this study the judgements have a significant role. Furthermore, due to the interpretivist epistemology, I have also selected theories that help me understand small states’ behaviour in the framework of the Presidency as well as interpret my research findings (Bryman 2012, p. 20).

### **3.2 Comparative Case Study Design**

In order to understand how small EU member states approach the Presidency, and what opportunities and challenges it represents, I need to base my study on research methods that would allow me to analyse the complexity of these conditions. The study of comparative politics incorporates a diversity of study types, but given my aim, I found that my research first and foremost took the form of an analysis “of similar processes and institutions in a limited number of countries” (Peters 2013 p. 11).

Upon choosing an adequate comparative method, I ruled out relying on surveys and archival data for my research, due to the qualitative nature of my research questions (Yin 2003, p. 6). Moreover, as I could not systematically control the events and behaviours that I studied, I also excluded the use of experiments (Yin 2003, p. 8). I thus narrowed my choice to either case studies or histories. However, as it was possible for me to actually interview people who took part in the events that I studied, in spite of my incapacity to control these events, I did not solely have to rely on historical documents as my only source of information (Yin 2003, p. 7). Therefore, I found case studies to be the most appropriate and useful method for my research. According to Yin (2003), “the distinctive need for case studies arises out of the desire to understand complex social phenomena” (p. 2). Hence, by using case studies, I hope to be able to interpret the core and complexity of my research problems.

The cases that I chose to study are first of all interesting for my research as they fit the criteria for being considered small EU member states, which was the primary condition upon my choice of cases. Then again, I wanted to compare cases based on their differences as well. I therefore decided to add two more criteria, which would separate my cases from one another in two steps: firstly, whether the states are new members to the EU (and thus the concept of the Presidency) or old; and secondly, whether the member states have held the Presidency or not. The criteria for my selection of cases, which resulted in three categories, are illustrated in the figure below (Figure 2).

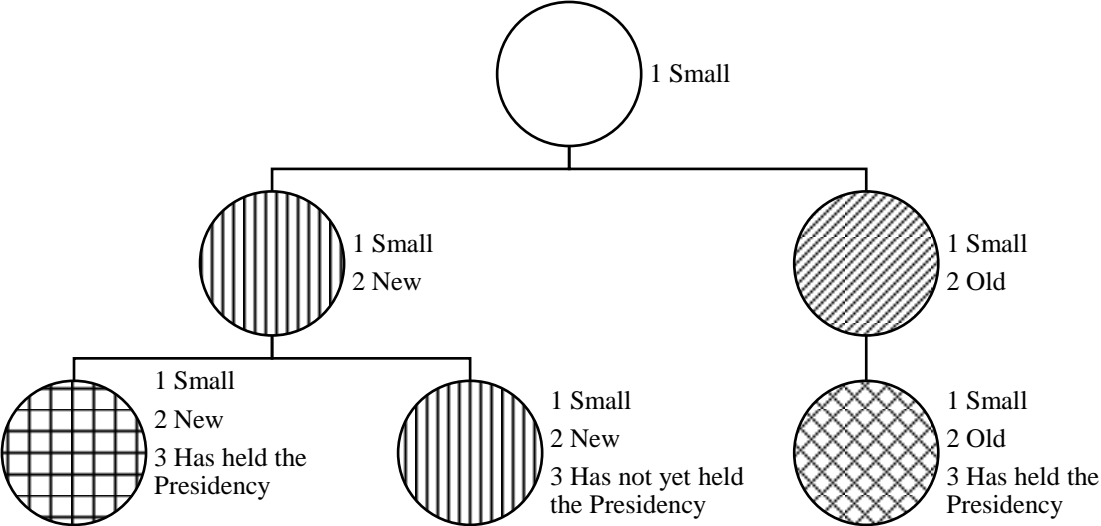


Figure 2 Criteria for Selection of Cases.

I chose to focus on three cases, one representing each of my above categories, in order to conduct a qualitative comparison (Hague and Harrop 2013, p. 363). However, one issue with choosing only three members states for my case study is, as Peters (2013) explains, “the mismatch between a rather small number of cases and a large number of variables” (p. 69). In other words, states are quite different to one another due to their culture, history, economy, etc. Nevertheless, I tried to choose three suitable states based on my above criteria, which resulted in the following three cases (left to right in Figure 2): Latvia, Estonia, and Denmark.

### **3.3 Selection of Cases**

Despite their differences, Latvia and Estonia still share important similarities. They are both small and relatively new EU member states, as they joined up in 2004 (European Union 2016). Furthermore, but less significant in relation to my case criteria, they share geographical and historical similarities due to their being neighbour countries on the eastern shore of the Baltic Sea. However, while Latvia has held the Presidency, in 2015, Estonia has yet to hold its first Presidency in 2018 (Tallberg 2006, p. 239-240). When choosing these two states for comparison, I was inspired by the most-similar case method, where research is focused on two similar cases which, despite their likeness, demonstrate apparent differences (Gerring 2007, p. 131). In the context of my study, Latvia and Estonia might differ, despite their many similarities, in their approach to the Presidency. Moreover, their view on and handling of the opportunities and challenges represented by the Presidency might be different.

Denmark, on the other hand, while also being a small member state, differs from Latvia and Estonia when it comes to my two other case criteria. The country joined the EC in 1973 – 31 years prior to Latvia and Estonia – and could thereby be considered as an old member state in comparison to these latter two. Furthermore, not only has it held the Presidency, but it has held it seven times (Adler-Nissen, Hassing Nielsen and Sørensen 2012, p. 6). In other words, Denmark has an extensive experience of being both an EU member state as well as a holder of the Presidency, in contrast to Latvia and Estonia. I was thus inspired by the most-different cases method (Gerring 2007, p. 139) when choosing Denmark as a case, as it would be interesting to compare to my two other, more similar, cases. Table 1 provides an overview of my three cases, with the purpose of illustrating their similarities and differences in relation to their size and power in the EU, as well as their year of join up and number of Presidencies held. Furthermore, the Presidency trio of the respective state is shown at the far

right of the table (the programme was introduced in 2007) (Adler-Nissen, Hassing Nielsen and Sørensen 2012, p. 6).

*Table 1 Overview of Cases.*

<b>Member state</b>	<b>Inhabitants in millions</b> (European Union 2016)	<b>Seats in the European Parliament</b> (European Union 2016)	<b>Number of votes in the Council of Ministers</b> (European Council 2016)	<b>Year of EU join up</b> (European Union 2016)	<b>Presidency period(s)</b> (European Union 2016)	<b>Trio</b> (Decision 2007/5/EC, p. 12)
Denmark	5.7	13	7	1973	1973 Jul-Dec 1978 Jan-Jun 1982 Jul-Dec 1987 Jul-Dec 1993 Jan-Jun 2002 Jul-Dec 2012 Jan-Jun	N/A N/A N/A N/A N/A N/A T4: Poland, Denmark, Cyprus
Latvia	2.0	8	4	2004	2015 Jan-Jun	T6: Italy, Latvia, Luxembourg
Estonia	1.3	6	4	2004	2018 Jan-Jun	T8: United Kingdom, Estonia, Bulgaria

### 3.4 Material

One of the benefits of using a case study as a method is that it requires the use of multiple types of material in order to examine the research topic (Yin 2003, p. 97). In order for me to analyse my cases, and answer my research questions, I had to exploit different primary as well as secondary sources.

#### 3.4.1 Primary Sources

The in-depth interviews that I conducted with the state officials were a valuable source of information for my study. However, in order to strengthen the relevance and credibility of the answers, I established a set of criteria when selecting my interviewees. Firstly, they all had to be high level government officials, with knowledge and access to information about the Presidency as well as the right to speak on behalf of their states. On the other hand, the situation of the interviewees set a certain limitation to their answers, as they might not speak openly and give candid answers due to their representative position. In order to reduce this

limitation, the interviewees have been kept anonymous and referred to simply as Official A, B, and C (see Chapter 10). My second criterion was the geographical location of the interviewees, as I wanted to be able to meet them in person and interview them face to face, despite my limited time schedule and the financial resources available for my research. Below, I provide an overview of the interviewees (Table 2).

*Table 2 Overview of Interviewees.*

<b>Member State</b>	<b>Position/Title</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>Place</b>
Denmark	Official at the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs	2016-04-19	Copenhagen, Denmark
Latvia	Official at the Latvian Embassy in Denmark	2016-04-13	Copenhagen, Denmark
Estonia	Official at the Estonian Government Office, European Union Affairs Department	2016-03-02	Tallinn, Estonia

In addition to the empirical material gained from the interviews, I also conducted a content analysis of official documents, such as the “Results of the Latvian Presidency of the Council of the European Union” and the “Action Plan for Preparations of the Estonian Presidency of the Council of the European Union” –published by government institutions (see Chapter 10).

### **3.4.2 Secondary Sources**

I have also used different types of academic literature, relevant to this study, as sources of information. In this context, I have made extensive use of various books and journal articles, published by scholars and researchers in the field, in order to support my main arguments and increase the relevance of my study. Finally, I have also utilised official websites of the EU and the states in focus to support facts and gather necessary information.

### **3.5 Validity and Reliability**

I find it necessary to highlight the importance of external validity and the generalisability of my findings. As previously mentioned, choosing only three states as cases is problematic. The reason is that a seemingly endless amount of variables is represented by only a few countries (Hague and Harrop 2013, p. 365). But, as pointed out by Hague and Harrop (2013), this is particularly an issue for those who believe that it is possible in comparative politics, as in a

laboratory experiment, to single out the effect of one variable (p. 365). But such an experiment is impossible in comparative politics, as each country is unique.

Nevertheless, it is a common belief that case studies, especially when the number of cases is small, do not provide a satisfactory basis for generalisation (Yin 2003, p. 10). But, as Yin (2003) argues, case studies “are generalizable to theoretical propositions and not to populations or universes” (p. 10). The aim is not to generate a statistical generalisation, but rather an analytical generalisation (Yin 2003, p. 10).

Another important notion is the reliability of the gathering of my empirical material, meaning that if the same case study would be conducted again with the same procedures by another researcher, the findings should be the same. By presenting the procedures that I have used during my research, as well as documentation and references, another researcher could theoretically conduct the same case study. This test, together with the issues of external validity, also reflects a travelling problem. The question is whether my research, which has been designed for my study specifically, could be useful or meaningful in another setting (Peters 2013 p. 93). I argue that it can indeed be both useful and meaningful if the aim is to conduct a similar case study of small EU member states as holders of the Presidency.

An essential goal with reliability is to minimize the level of biases in a study, for example the selection bias. As Peters (2013) states, “there is a natural bias in comparative research arising from the tendency to select the cases that the researcher knows best, and to attempt to make the theory fit the cases rather than vice versa” (p. 53). In spite of the risk related to this bias, I claim that I have chosen my cases based on their meeting my criteria for selection of cases rather than my personal knowledge of these countries (see sub-chapter 3.2).



## **4 Denmark**

### **4.1 Successful Presidency**

A Danish Representative (hereinafter *Official A*, see Table 2 and Chapter 10) from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, who was closely associated with the Danish Presidency in 2012, defined a successful Presidency as having several key characteristics. The most important of these characteristics is to be an honest broker in negotiations, which he believed is a quality praised by the rest of the EU members as well. Furthermore, Official A (2016) also characterised a successful Presidency by: good preparation of the meetings; kept deadlines; a common understanding of the Presidency's goals; clear and transparent communication; openly shared information; and finally, silenced domestic interests.

For Denmark, and other member states, the Presidency represents a chance to lead the Council and promote 'the Danish way' and culture (Official A 2016). Moreover, as highlighted by Official A (2016), it provides an opportunity to show what a small member state is actually capable of, and thus prove that not only larger member states can perform well in the Presidency. The rankings show that size is not a requirement in order to be successful: for example, Luxembourg did very well regardless of its small administration (Official A 2016).

According to Official A (2016), the most important source of inspiration for Denmark in the preparations for the Presidency was the previously held Danish Presidencies, such as the one in 2002. However, it has to be acknowledged that after the implementation of the Lisbon Treaty, the role of the rotating Presidency changed. Therefore, the Danes also looked beyond their borders: primarily at the Swedish Presidency of 2009; but also at other member states that held the Presidency after the Treaty implementation, such as Spain, Belgium, and Hungary (Official A 2016). However, Denmark did not emphasize taking Presidencies that were held prior to the Treaty into consideration, due to the changes that it caused (Official A 2016).

### **4.2 Opportunities and Challenges**

As stated by Official A (2016), the main opportunity that the Presidency offered to Denmark was the possibility "to really work in the EU machinery". In addition, the representatives in Brussels were exposed to a unique insight into how the EU works, which is an experience and

source of knowledge that is difficult to gain in any other way (Official A 2016). Furthermore, as mentioned above, the Presidency was a chance for Denmark to show, during these six months, what they could do (Official A 2016). For newer member states, the Presidency is a good opportunity to showcase the EU domestically: how it works, what it can do and how each member state can contribute. Moreover, the Presidency gives an opportunity to set the agenda; although 95 percent of the agenda is already determined, it is still possible to influence the subjects of discussion: for example, the dialogue between Denmark and the Commission regarding agenda suggestions began long before the Danish Presidency in 2012 (Official A 2016). Hence, the Commission introduced several proposals before the Danish Presidency, so that these would be ready in time for the Danes to handle (Official A 2016). Official A (2016) emphasized that this type of cooperation is the result of an early dialogue and a good example of how it is possible for upcoming holders of the Presidency to influence the agenda.

On the other hand, Official A (2016) also confirmed that there were all sorts of challenges for Denmark while facing the Presidency: the low number of people working for the Presidency domestically and in Brussels; to moderately move those topical documents forward, where Denmark had opt-outs (European Monetary Fund, for example); external factors, which could affect the decision-making in Brussels, such as various elections (France, Germany); and the domestic political landscape, as Denmark had previously changed its government either before (2002; 2012) or during (1993) each Presidency, which in turn made it difficult to build external relationships prior to the Presidency due to the exchange of ministers. He noted that the new government elected in 2012 set the Presidency as a priority and thus postponed its domestic agenda until the end of the Presidency.

Denmark benefited from the Presidency in many ways, on a national as well as an international level. First of all, it raised the awareness of the EU among the Danish people, as the Presidency received a lot of free media coverage. Official A (2016) claimed that this is indeed something that all Presidencies benefit from. Then, as Denmark showed that it was able to deliver a professional Presidency, it gained respect and credibility, not only during the six months' term, but also afterwards (Official A 2016). As pointed out by Official A (2016), Denmark still benefited throughout the year that followed its Presidency, due to its knowledge of the documents and procedures, as well as its relationships to Representatives in Brussels. Moreover, on a personal level, many individuals involved in the Presidency faced promising career opportunities and promotions (Official A 2016).

On the other hand, the EU also benefited from the Danish Presidency. The Danes showed what a structured, organised and Brussels-based Presidency could deliver (Official A 2016). In addition, they also proved that a successful Presidency does not depend on the amount of people involved, but rather on the level of organisation (Official A 2016). This was definitely something that the EU acknowledged: for example, the Secretariat evaluated the Presidency's success and through this process, the Danish representatives contributed with their experiences (Official A 2016). According to Official A (2016), who believes that the EU implemented several changes based on the Danish advice, the Danes have a reputation at the EU Secretariat as being some sort of experts when it comes to Presidencies (which is partly due to their extensive experience).

### **4.3 National Interests**

As the most important goal of the Danish Presidency was to be an honest broker among the member states, Denmark did not try to promote a national agenda (Official A 2016). With that said, there were still possibilities to tilt the agenda in favour of the Danes: stalling matters that were not in their interest; or select and prioritise legislations that were. For example, the environmental issues were important for the new government (it wanted a Green Presidency), and therefore, proposals connected to the environment and energy efficiency were advanced (Official A 2016). However, as an act of balance, the Danes also put forward proposals that they openly disagreed with, which stressed their seriousness about being a fair and neutral broker. Nevertheless, Official A (2016) highlighted that finding a balance is really important in order not to lose trust and confidence from other member states, as it is easy to perceive when a state is prioritising its own interests – once the trust has been lost, it takes a lot of work to gain it back.

According to Official A (2016), all member states, regardless of their size, have generally different individual interests. Whether or not Denmark has similar interests as other small member states depends on the policy areas. For instance, the Baltic Eastern Partnership is more important to eastern small states than to Denmark. If the documents are prepared in time for EU28, then the small member states will be included in the negotiations, which is important for them (Official A 2016). In order for the small states to not be run over by the large ones, it is essential that the EU has adequate rules in place, as well as open and transparent processes. In addition, Official A (2016) underlined the issue with trust in the Commission: the small states view the Commission as their guardian, whereas the larger

states do not have this kind of relationship: “small states like being part of the Commission because it gives them control and insurance that the same rules apply to everyone” (Official A 2016).

#### **4.4 Cooperation**

In the same context, the close cooperation with the Commission was an essential factor in the preparations for, as well as during and after, the Danish Presidency (Official A 2016). Official A (2016) described that meetings on all levels were attended in early stages, and in the framework of the agenda planning, the Commission prepared the legislation beforehand. He added that it was also important for people to meet before the Presidency and get to know each other, as having good relations and contacts is crucial for a successful presidency. Furthermore, the Committee of Permanent Representatives (COREPER) ambassadors had at least weekly calls with their counterparts in the Commission. It is customary and important to have a close relationship with the Commission, as its representatives possess the expertise and the necessary knowledge of different documents to facilitate a Presidency (Official A 2016). Official A (2016) stressed that these are the people that a member state would like to have on its side during its term, as they could either provide meaningful assistance or impede the work, depending on their relationship with the holder of the Presidency.

The Trio Programme was described by Official A (2016) as “an academic exercise” which, in his words, “is good for the people who are doing the real planning”. In other words, it is meaningful for those who will compose the national programme, because the document helps to point out the areas which need more attention as well as facilitates the contact with actors and institutions. Otherwise, for the other people involved in the Presidency, this document is often left rather unattended and quickly forwarded to the archives, as “it is not a document that anybody really reads” (Official A 2016).

## 5 Latvia

### 5.1 Successful Presidency

According to a Latvian government official (hereinafter *Official B*, see Table 2 and Chapter 10), a Presidency is successful if the member state's citizens perceive it during and after the rotation time. He explained that the opinion of the people matters more in the evaluation of a state's Presidency than the officials' judgement (Official B 2016). In addition, a Presidency's success depends on how the incumbent state responds to, and handles, unexpected events that are impossible to prepare for (Official B 2016). For Latvia, the Presidency provided an opportunity to introduce the people to the EU and increase their knowledge about it (Official B 2016).

Official B (2016) described that in Latvia, national politicians tend to blame the EU for its shortcomings and insufficient response to crises. Often, any benefit gained by a state is portrayed as a result of national politics rather than the outcome the EU's efforts. At the same time, problems are often blamed on the EU, whereas in reality, the issue might be due to national states' having failed to implement the required legislation (Official B 2016). It is also sometimes forgotten that the decisions made by the EU are made by the Council, which includes the heads of states and representatives of national governments (Official B 2016). However, Official B added that this is more of a general issue, which is not related to the Presidency per se (Official B 2016).

In its preparations for the Presidency, Latvia took inspiration from several previous holders: Presidencies prior to the Lisbon Treaty as well as those subsequent to the implementation of the treaty (Official B 2016). Official B (2016) explained that this is a common trait for any first time holder of the Presidency. Latvia consulted with other member states: first of all Slovenia, as its Presidency occurred before the Lisbon Treaty, which made its task even more difficult since the Presidency had a superior role at the time (Official B 2016). Because of its budget contraction, Latvia consulted with the Danes as they had a minimum budget for their Presidency. Moreover, Latvia naturally tried to learn from its southern neighbour, Lithuania. In other words, there was no lack of possible consultations (Official B 2016).

## 5.2 Opportunities and Challenges

As expressed by Official B (2016), the Presidency offered many opportunities for Latvia, such as working on the integration process and the transition from a Latvian way of thinking into a more European one. Furthermore, it could integrate EU policies as well as recent steps taken by other member states, and show an ability to act as an efficient middle man (Official B 2016). Official B (2016), who was in Sweden during the Swedish Presidency, recalled his colleague as saying “You really are integrated into the EU once you have had the Presidency”. What he meant was that, despite the work and representation in Brussels, a state will only realise how the EU functions once it has held the Presidency itself (Official B 2016).

Moreover, Official B (2016) explained, it is not uncommon that people still think in terms of ‘us vs. the EU’ in Latvia; and the Presidency helped transform this type of thinking into ‘us – the EU’. The Presidency helped to explain to people that whatever is done domestically has a wider EU context, and everything that is done in Brussels is related to domestic politics (Official B 2016). Another opportunity for Latvia was to implement the planning process and perspective of the EU, and to understand that the legislative process starts well before the actual proposal has been submitted by the Commission (Official B 2016). Therefore, Official B (2016) clarified that Latvia had to be on board early in order to be able to affect the results.

The Presidency also gave a chance to show the country that the economic crisis was over and that it would be possible, through reforms and fiscal discipline, to come out on top of it (Official B 2016). Overall, the Presidency was a perfect platform to tie together the steps and policies that would enhance the connection between the EU and Latvia, such as becoming part of the Eurozone, overcoming the economic crisis, and preparing for upcoming Presidencies (Official B 2016). Small states are at times more efficient than large ones, as they wish to promote the EU’s interests rather than their own: since small states are more interested in investing in a functioning EU (Official B 2016). For this purpose, Official B (2016) concluded, the Presidency offers a good opportunity for small states to contribute.

The most important challenges that came with the Presidency were: firstly, the organisational challenges, as the Presidency was a large and complicated event to organise, as well as an intimidating task; secondly, the domestic political landscape, as Latvia was facing elections in October 2014, just a few months before its Presidency, which meant that the government might become composed of unexperienced first time ministers; and thirdly, the European political landscape, as the Commission and the European Parliament (EP) were

newly elected (Official B 2016). Moreover, Official B (2016) added, the new head of Commission had his own agenda, which reflected on the Presidency agenda. Furthermore, a great challenge to any Presidency holder is the risk of unexpected events, which are difficult to anticipate and plan for (Official B 2016). Official B (2016) pointed out that in the case of the Latvian Presidency, the unforeseen terror attacks in Paris and Copenhagen, in addition to the migration crisis and the situation in Greece, changed the Presidency's agenda and priorities entirely. Another challenge was Latvia's small administration, which meant that there was a constant lack of personnel and that the state needed to employ and educate new people (Official B 2016). Finally, the language barrier was a notable challenge, although not as significant as the aforementioned ones, as French has an important role in the heart of the EU, but is much less used in the Eastern member states (Official B 2016).

In addition to the aspect of better integration, Latvia benefited from the Presidency in other ways as well (Official B 2016). One such benefit, according to Official B (2016), was getting a better understanding of the EU's work and its institutions. Moreover, the Latvian civil service gained capability and reputation as being a good mediator. Furthermore, the clash between 'us' and 'them' was broken and 'we are the EU' became the new motto (Official B 2016). The EU benefited from the Latvian Presidency through a better functioning EU, as Latvia once again proved that size does not determine the efficiency of the Presidency (Official B 2016). Finally, Official B (2016) concluded, the Presidency brought forward new issues that required to be discussed on the EU level.

### **5.3 National Interests**

In order for the EU to function efficiently, Latvia's main goal was to carry out the Presidency well and to not fail: therefore, no pretentious or overly ambitious agenda was announced (Official B 2016). Official B (2016) added that such an agenda would likely have been unachievable. Latvia wanted to take on the role of an honest broker and spend as much effort as possible on advancing relatively difficult issues (Official B 2016). Although some issues were of greater interest to Latvia, such as the Digital Single Market, there were no issues on the agenda that were of particular interest to Latvia alone (Official B 2016). One might say that Latvia's main national interest was a well-functioning and strong EU, which could face economic challenges (Official B 2016). Official B (2016) acknowledged that the country's geographical surroundings were of great concern too, as Latvia is located at the EU's easternmost boarder. It is natural that a state's relations to its neighbour countries are

important, and hence, it was essential for Latvia to hold a successful Eastern Partnership Summit. Moreover, Energy Security was also important for Latvia, which became apparent as it was moved to the top of the priority list (Official B 2016).

Official B (2016) claimed that it is generally acknowledged that smaller member states are interested in a strong and functioning EU, where their interests are well balanced with those of the larger member states. This issue has been addressed through the Lisbon Treaty and negotiations regarding how to balance the size of the states are pending (Official B 2016). Whether smaller states have similar interests as larger ones depends on the actual policy area; however, some issues bring up differences between all member states, regardless of their size (Official B 2016). One such issue, according to Official B (2016), is the question of whether the EU should be federalised or constitute of a collection of member states. He brought up Denmark, as an example, which has a different opinion towards this question in comparison with other small states (this is mainly due to the countries' different experiences with the EU integration). Official B (2016) explained that "Latvia wants to be as integrated as possible, whereas Denmark wants to be as close to the core as possible". Furthermore, Denmark's stand is based on several opt-outs, its exclusion from other unions (such as the Banking Union), and results of referenda (Official B 2016). In other words, there is a clear division within the EU, which is not a good thing. Nevertheless, the underlining goal of all member states is to keep the unity of the EU, which has become a more difficult task lately (Official B 2016).

## **5.4 Cooperation**

Generally speaking, Official B (2016) described, there are two ways for states to approach the Presidency, which can differ between small and large states: a Brussels-based approach and a nation-based one. Small states usually tend to make their decisions in Brussels during their Presidency, as their representatives are stationed there, whereas larger states tend to make their decisions in their respective capital (Official B 2016). Therefore, the representatives in Brussels are mostly engaged in working with the Commission (Official B 2016). According to Official B (2016), in Latvia's case, the cooperation with the Commission started at least one year before its Presidency and six months before its Trio. In order to set up priorities for the Trio, cooperation with the Commission was required (Official B 2016). The cooperation with the Commission was important, as Official B (2016) mentioned before, as it provided a chance to get on board with the legislative process early on and to forward suggestions in



time. Consultations with the Commission started on all levels around six months prior to the Presidency, when ministers as well as representatives met with the commissioners (Official B 2016). Once the new Latvian Government was in place, a meeting with the Commission was arranged in Brussels. In general, cooperation with the Commission was very intimate and took place on all levels. The interaction with the Commission helped to introduce and promote issues that were important for Latvia (Official B 2016).

As Latvia started its preparations for the Presidency in good time, it was often ahead in the planning compared to its fellow Trio states. Therefore, the cooperation between the Trio states was impeded (Official B 2016). However, the Trio jointly announced its priorities one day prior to the Presidency, which was a unique event: the foreign ministers of Latvia and Luxembourg were both present in Rome and presented the programme in the company of the Italian foreign minister (Official B 2016). Official B (2016) concluded that as the Latvian Presidency was based in Brussels, most of the cooperation took place between the COREPER ambassadors of the Trio countries and the administrative in Brussels.

## 6 Estonia

### 6.1 Successful Presidency

According to an Estonian government official (hereinafter *Official C*, see Table 2 and Chapter 10), who is engaged in the Presidency preparations, the success of the Presidency is measured differently depending on the perspective: for example, the Prime Minister, journalists, or experts all have different views on how they experience the Presidency as their working fields differ from each other. The Presidency is often defined by question such as: what was done, whether or not any results were delivered, and how unexpected events were handled (Official C 2016). The agenda is also an essential factor, in terms of what was brought forward and how meaningful the debate was (Official C 2016). For smaller member states, it is important to do well and deliver for the union: “do well, not in terms of the national agenda, but in means of doing an effective work and being prepared for the Presidency” (Official C 2016). Nevertheless, Official C (2016) concluded that the measures are different, which makes it hard to define a successful presidency.

Official C (2016) explained that “‘doing well’ in the Presidency is something that defines Estonia for everybody else, at the expense of domestic expectations. Therefore, it represents a really important role for the civil service and is a sixth priority for the Government at the moment”. However, he added, “how the political establishment views it is still questionable” (Official C 2016). Official C (2016) elaborated that “unfortunately, the Presidency is pictured domestically as a bureaucratic and rather boring show, which only gets more exciting when crisis hits”. Nevertheless, he believed that this will probably change once the political establishment will understand its responsibilities and important role in the Presidency, which is likely to happen approximately one year prior to the Presidency.

In its preparations for the Presidency, Estonia has (and continues to) observed all of the other states (Official C 2016). Estonian officials have been taking part in other countries’ Presidency teams for the last five years, observing the challenges and opportunities (Official C 2016). As a personal favourite, Official C brought up Luxembourg’s Presidency (in 2015), which in his mind represents a successful Presidency where a small and extremely professional civil service was able to do a great job. However, he acknowledged that Luxembourg is, of course, better equipped as it is located in the centre of the union and has no disturbing language barriers. Furthermore, the Estonians have looked at small as well as large

states (Official C 2016). Based on these observations, Official C (2016) concluded that there seems to be high expectations for small states' Presidencies as they have proven to be more effective. However, larger states, on the other hand, have more professional Presidencies but often set their ambitions too high and hence fail to deliver. Nevertheless, Estonia's cooperation with other Baltic states is really close, due to their similarities (Official C 2016).

## **6.2 Opportunities and Challenges**

As stated by Official C (2016), Estonia's main opportunity in the Presidency is the transformation of the public administration. He elaborated that going through the whole process of the Presidency "forms a professional and really pro-European civil service for the future, which stays with us [Estonians] for decades to come and this is where we [Estonians] invest a lot" (Official C 2016). In other words, networks and relationships have a central role in how capable the public administration is on a daily basis (Official C 2016).

The Presidency also provides other opportunities, such as to: showcase your country; amplify already existing projects; strengthen the cooperation between domestic and international institutions; create opportunities for local businesses, industries, and restaurants; attract more investments; and finally, bring Europe closer to the Estonians (Official C 2016). It is also an opportunity for individuals to show what they are capable of and invest in their future career, which might hopefully result in more Estonian officials within the 'Brussels bubble' (Official C 2016).

Furthermore, Official C (2016) regarded the European political landscape during the Estonian Presidency as an opportunity. Of course, the British referendum on EU membership will be one of the cornerstones in EU politics in the near future, as well as the national elections in France, Germany, and Italy (Official C 2016). According to Official C (2016), the real opportunity lies in the fact that the mandate of the commissioners and members of the EP (MEPs) is close to an end, which makes the commissioners and MEPs more motivated to achieve agreements and show results. He explained: "we see from everybody that the dynamics of negotiations change once the political cycle ends, so the [European] Parliament gets in the mood of getting things delivered; the same for the Commission, because everybody wants to show results". The Estonians hope that this kind of mood sets in, so that the topics that were long discussed will result in an agreement (Official C 2016).

In terms of great challenges, Official C (2016) highlighted the external expectations on Estonia regarding its digital advantages, which in turn increases the expectations on the

Estonian Presidency. As failure depends on the expectations, the Estonians approach the Presidency with a strategy of ‘few promises and good results’, rather than with high expectations (Official C 2016). To justify their approach, Official C (2016) explained:

In a way, one has to understand that this is only a six months period, it is not a world-changing event, unless [the] world changes dramatically and you are at the spot of decision making and need to do something about it. Otherwise, it is pretty routine.

Moreover, the Presidency represents an enormous challenge for the public administration, which has limited human resources in a small state, and which has to be extremely professional in order to deliver and understand the surrounding political landscape (Official C 2016). Furthermore, regardless of the fact that the Estonian civil service is rather pro-European, it is still used to an Estonian approach (Official C 2016). The Presidency, however, forces it to focus on more global perspectives and potential issues beyond Estonia’s experience (Official C 2016). The challenge all Presidencies have to face is the ‘unexpected and impossible to plan for’, which can interfere with the agenda and/or change its course entirely (Official C 2016).

For Estonia, the politicians represent a challenge, as they have not invested enough time and energy in their European relationships (Official C 2016). There are, of course, some exceptions, but generally there are very few Estonian politicians who have some kind of relation to their European colleagues. This is an unfortunate situation, as most of the legislation in Estonia originates from Europe, but hopefully the Presidency will lead to improvements (Official C 2016). Less significant, but still worth mentioning, are the simple challenges in logistics: for example, Tallinn lacks a large conference centre (Official C 2016).

### **6.3 National Interests**

When asked whether or not Estonia will pursue its national interests during the Presidency, Official C (2016) answered: “Forget about it!”. However, as Estonia’s interests intertwine to some extent with the interests of the EU, its national interests will be brought to attention automatically. Still, the main standpoint is, as expressed by Official C (2016): “We certainly learned through the 10 years of membership that it [the agenda] is always the European interests not the national interests”. He also claimed that Estonia will not put forward any new

proposals, but rather try to deliver on the existing key files. In addition, if people perceive that Estonia is pursuing its national interests, this would be “the biggest disaster” that the Presidency could bring (Official C 2016). However, there is an opportunity to raise issues that are of national interest: Danes as well as Swedes have done it with their ‘flexicurity’ concept, which later was adopted by several other Europe countries (Official C 2016). Official C (2016) explained that sometimes, when the best of a state’s national achievements are amplified during the Presidency, they are acknowledged and might be adopted; but if you bring national failures to the table, they could have a negative effect on the state’s reputation. As mentioned before, Estonia is expected to promote digital achievements, but since it is likely that the Estonian concept of e-governance might not work everywhere, it is safer to not focus too much upon it (Official C 2016).

Small member states have similar interests depending on the policy field. A lot depends on their geographical position: for example, Eastern European countries often have similar interests (some due to their Eastern neighbour – Russia), whereas Nordic countries have their own common interests (Official C 2016). Concepts such as transparency, open governance, and cooperation are commonly valued in many EU member states, but not in all of them (Official C 2016). Official C (2016) added that export is an interest shared among small states as they depend on it more than larger ones do. Also, there are many differences between the interests of states, which are not positively explained by their size: some believe in the Euro, some do not; some value innovation, some do not; some want changes in legislation, some do not etc. (Official C 2016). Furthermore, all states have different opinions on the question of federalism, regardless of their size (Official C 2016). Interests can also vary domestically, where some political parties believe in the EU, whereas others remain rather sceptical and would prefer an exit: this is due to external factors and takes place in many EU countries at the moment (Official C 2016).

## **6.4 Cooperation**

As Estonia is ahead in their preparations for the Presidency, the cooperation with other the Trio countries is non-existent at the moment (Official C 2016). The Brits are occupied with their referendum and discussions are expected to start once it has been held (Official C 2016). However, Official C (2016) claimed that although meetings on different levels take place already, a closer cooperation is expected to begin in the near future. The Trio Programme

document, he said, “should not be taken really seriously but the Programme itself forces countries to work together, which is a good thing” (Official C 2016).

According to Official C (2016), the cooperation with the Commission relies on mutual benefit, as both sides need to show results: on the one hand, the Presidency needs the Commission to regulate proposals; and on the other hand, the Commission needs the Presidency to land an agreement. It is in Estonia’s interests to have good relations with the Commission (Official C 2016). Estonian officials are already working alongside with the Commission and gathering experience in time for the Presidency (Official C 2016).

## **7 Analysis**

In this chapter, I compare the empirical material from my three cases – Denmark, Latvia, and Estonia – and present the similarities and differences extracted from the answers in my interviews. Furthermore, I apply the leadership theory and the identity notion of social constructivism to my analysis of the empirical material. When possible, I refer to existing literature that supports my findings.

### **7.1 Approach to the Presidency**

There are several similarities in how the officials of Denmark, Latvia, and Estonia (2016) define a successful presidency. They all agree on the fact that the Presidency's role is to remain an honest broker throughout the rotation period, which also is a determinant of its success. In other words, they all agree that the chair's role is to be a good leader. Furthermore, how unexpected events are handled during the Presidency is also an essential measurement of success (Official A 2016; Official B 2016; and Official C 2016). The officials also added other elements of success, such as transparent and open communication (Official A 2016), as well as results and meaningful debates (Official C 2016). The fact that these factors were not mentioned by all officials does not necessarily mean that they are not important to all three states, but it underlines that there is no common measurement system in place in the EU and that a successful Presidency therefore is hard to define (see Vandecasteele and Bossuyt 2014, p. 234, and Chapter 2.4).

Whether or not small states in question pursue their national interests during the Presidency was made clear by all three officials: the most important aim is to be an honest broker and a good middle man in the EU negotiations, which is the definition of a leader, and thus means that national interests are silenced (Official A 2016; Official B 2016; and Official C 2016). They also agreed that if the incumbent state is perceived by other member states as promoting its national interests, it would lose trust and respect, which would take time and effort to regain (Official A 2016; Official B 2016; Official C 2016). Official C (2016) referred to this type of situation as “the biggest disaster” that could happen.

However, Official B and C explained that the national interests of their states to a certain extent overlap with those of the EU, as it is a mutual interest to have a well-functioning and strong EU (Official B 2016; Official C 2016). Both approach the Presidency

with modest ambition and with the aim to advance negotiations on existing proposals. This also has to do with Latvia and Estonia's need for identity formation, as their European identities are self-perceived as vulnerable due to their geographical location. A strong and functioning EU is especially important for small member states due to their limited power (Official B 2016). The Commission is perceived as a guardian and ally (Official A 2016; also Bunse 2009; or Panke 2010a; or Thorhallsson 2000; or Magnusdottir 2010), and serves as a cognitive power resource for small states in the Presidency.

## **7.2 Opportunities and Challenges**

Officials A, B, and C (2016) all agreed that the Presidency represents many opportunities for a small member state. First and foremost, it provides the public administration with unique experience of the EU's machinery (see Magnusdottir 2010; or Randma-Liiv 2002; or Thorhallsson 2006a; or "Action Plan for Preparations of the Estonian Presidency of the Council of the European Union" 2015.). It also offers small states an opportunity to prove their effectiveness and promote their capabilities in the union. This, in turn, helps them to gain legitimacy and support from other states, which strengthens their identity (Official A 2016; also Wendt 1999, p. 224). Bunse (2009) states, in the same manner, that the Presidency provides an opportunity to show what small states "can do" (p. 28). Furthermore, as the Presidency puts the incumbent state in the centre of the attention, it enables the state to showcase the EU domestically, as well as introduce the state to a broader public (Official A 2016; Official B 2016; and Official C 2016). This is really important for small and new member states such as Latvia (and first time holders of the Presidency) and Estonia, which thus have an opportunity to be at the helm of Europe.

For a new member state, the Presidency is also an essential chance to improve the integration processes, as mentioned by Official B and C (2016). In Latvia, there used to be, and still is in Estonia, a notion of 'us vs. them' (the EU); and the Presidency provides an opportunity to close that gap (Official B 2016; Official C 2016). However, the aspect of integration is not only important for new member states, as it was also an opportunity for Denmark to raise the EU awareness among its citizens, who are often pictured as rather euro-sceptical (Magnusdottir 2010, p. 195). Here, the role of identity in social constructivism plays a significant role, as the Presidency represents a chance for Latvia and Estonia to develop their European identity, and an opportunity for the Danes to show theirs.



Although it was agreed that the Presidency does not amplify national interests, according to Official A (2016), it still gives an opportunity to set the agenda. This is mainly done by using cognitive power resources such as close relationship with the Commission, or in the Danish case, the advantages of an experienced and professional administration (see Magnúsdóttir 2010; or Bengtsson et al. 2004). Official A (2016) also revealed interesting methods to shape the agenda while still remaining neutral, which is managed by manipulating the timing of decision-making: delaying adoptions that are not in line with national interests, or via exclusion and structuring of the agenda (see Tallberg 2003, p. 18; or Thomson 2008, p. 598).

While Estonia views the European political landscape at the time of their Presidency as an opportunity, Denmark and Latvia perceived it as a challenge (although it was stated as an opportunity in the “Results of the Latvian Presidency of the Council of the European Union” 2015) (see Kirchner 1992, p. 93). Other external factors, such as national elections in France or Germany, can have a significant effect on decision-making in Brussels, as experienced by Denmark (Official A 2016). In addition, as experienced by Latvia, a newly elected Commission and EP can be challenging for the Presidency, as the new members have yet to find their standing and the new head of Commission has a personal agenda for the upcoming years, which has to be incorporated to the Presidency agenda (Official B 2016).

A small administration can also be seen as a challenge, but if it is professional and experienced, it can be considered an opportunity instead (see Thorhallsson 2006a). Yet, all three interviewees concluded that a constant lack of human resources is definitely a challenge (see Randma-Liiv 2002). They also agreed that the Presidency provides rare opportunities for individuals working in the field, as it creates a platform to show individual capabilities and could enable great career opportunities (see Randma-Liiv 2002).

In addition to the above mentioned external challenges, all three officials mentioned the domestic political landscape as another challenge. Domestic politics meant challenges for Denmark and Latvia, which both had elections prior to the Presidency. This created a situation where the Governments had new and possibly unexperienced ministers, who had not had enough time to properly prepare for the Presidency (Official A 2016; Official B 2016). For Estonia, the challenge concerning domestic politics is more connected to the politicians, as they have not committed enough time or energy in their relationships with European colleagues (Official C 2010; also Randma-Liiv 2002).

The most difficult challenge highlighted by the three officials is still the unforeseeable events in global politics, which are impossible to plan for and can drastically change the course of the Presidency (see Tallberg 2006). How the incumbent state deals with

these situations is crucial to how the Presidency is later perceived (Official B 2016). This type of situation is a threat to the identity of the incumbent and how it is perceived by others. Furthermore, to successfully handle the unforeseeable events, good leadership skills are required. Finally, Official B (2016) and Official C (2016) underlined that the Presidency is an intimidating organisational challenge for first-time holders. This is not the case for Denmark anymore, which has held the Presidency seven times (Official A 2016).

*Table 3 Comparison of Case Findings.*

<b>Member state</b>	<b>Approach to the Presidency</b>	<b>Challenges</b>	<b>Opportunities</b>
Denmark	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Honest broker</li> <li>- Influence the agenda</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Small public administration</li> <li>- Domestic and European political landscape</li> <li>- Unforeseeable events</li> <li>- Danish opt-outs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Transformation of public administration</li> <li>- Show small states' capacity</li> <li>- Integrate and showcase the EU to Denmark and vice versa</li> <li>- Individual career opportunities</li> <li>- Set the Presidency agenda</li> </ul>
Latvia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Honest broker</li> <li>- Amplify European interests</li> <li>- Modest agenda</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Small public administration</li> <li>- Organisational challenges</li> <li>- Domestic and European political landscape</li> <li>- Unforeseeable events</li> <li>- Language barriers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Transformation of public administration</li> <li>- Show small states' capacity</li> <li>- Integrate and showcase the EU to Latvia and vice versa</li> <li>- Individual career opportunities</li> <li>- Invest in a functioning EU</li> </ul>
Estonia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Honest broker</li> <li>- Amplify European interests</li> <li>- Modest agenda</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Small public administration</li> <li>- Organisational challenges</li> <li>- Domestic political establishment</li> <li>- Unforeseeable events</li> <li>- Logistics</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Transformation of public administration</li> <li>- Show small states' capacity</li> <li>- Integrate and showcase the EU to Estonia and vice versa</li> <li>- Individual career opportunities</li> <li>- Strengthen external relations</li> <li>- European political landscape</li> <li>- Amplify already existing projects</li> </ul>

## 8 Discussion

In this chapter, I combine my empirical analysis and the existing academic literature in order to discuss the key findings of my research.

### 8.1 Size Matters

To begin with, I would like to take a step back and discuss why states' size matters in the institutional framework of the Presidency. Neumann and Gstöhl (2006) present two reasons for why size matters in the institutions (p. 20). The first reason relates to effects of power and emphasizes the advantageous position of great powers. Their status is a resource and prerogative, which means that the decision-makers take their interests into consideration at all times. Thus, the great power is present even when absent: "it exerts power in settings that it does not even know exist ... It governs from afar" (Neumann and Gstöhl 2006, p. 20). This is not the case with small states, as their interests are often overrun by the great powers, and therefore have to find different ways to make their voices heard. Panke (2010a) adds that in day-to-day negotiations, size is important for the influence in the EU, as smaller states are not listened to as much as the bigger states. Hence, smaller states face structural disadvantages (p. 17), which brings me to the second reason.

The second reason presented by Neumann and Gstöhl (2006) is that institutionalisation makes the flow of power effects from great powers more visible, which enables a formation of certain norms and rules, and makes room for debate and questions. As a result, a legal and political language for the discussion of interstate relations emerges, which serves as a medium and resource for states to manipulate (Neumann and Gstöhl 2006, p. 20). "It follows that, to small states, whose smallness is seen exactly as a result of them having access to limited material resources, this language is likely to be more important than it is to greater powers" (Neumann and Gstöhl 2006, p. 20). This structural factor explains why small states prefer institutionalized rules and norms, and why the institution of the Presidency is approached differently depending on the size of a state. The Presidency offers small states a ground where they can use the political language in their favour and thereby take advantage of the various opportunities offered by the Presidency. This platform is also ideal for using the cognitive power resources that small states possess, in order to promote national interests.

## 8.2 Amplifier or Silencer?

However, to what extent small states actually use these opportunities is still questionable and it is difficult to ignore the sceptical arguments about the capacity of the Presidency office. Tallberg (2006) lists the three main sceptical arguments found in the literature against the Presidency's capacity to shape the EU agenda: the first argument is that "the office of the Presidency has not been conferred any exclusive formal powers to initiative, and therefore cannot set the EU's policy agenda" (p. 82); the second argument is that the inherited agencies and unforeseeable events set limitations to the Presidencies' room for maneuver; and the third argument points to "the constraining effect of the norm of the neutral Presidency" (p. 82-83). These arguments raise the question whether the Presidency constitutes a power platform where the incumbent (small states in particular) can pursue national interests through the opportunities provided by the Presidency; or if the Presidency forces governments to sacrifice their national concerns for the European good (Tallberg 2006, p. 82).

Thus, is the Presidency an amplifier or a silencer of national interests? This question has been asked by many scholars in the field, such as Bengtsson, Elgström, and Tallberg, but also by Thomson, Magnúsdóttir, and Bunse (see Chapter 2). Most of them lean towards the amplifier approach, which I also did at the beginning of my study. However, based on the empirical findings at my disposal, I can conclude that the Presidency constitutes a platform for new EU members and first time holders of the office, where the national interests of the incumbent are silenced and the European common interests dominate the agenda. Although the Presidency also functioned as a silencer for Denmark in 2012 due to its emphasis on neutrality and the role of honest broker, the country was still able to amplify its national interests via agenda-management, and thereby, the Presidency has also served as an amplifier.

Furthermore, it is fair to claim that the sceptical arguments presented above from the literature are justified, to some extent, as all three of the officials that I interviewed confirmed that the role of being an 'honest broker' and to remain neutral is key to a successful Presidency. Moreover, they pointed out that the Presidency agenda is often determined by the previous holders and that unforeseeable events represent the most difficult challenges (see Chapter 7), as they can change the agenda entirely (as proven on several occasions in the past years). In addition, due to the Lisbon Treaty's coming to force, the office of the Presidency holds even less power than it used to do prior to the Treaty (Stellinger in Adler-Nissen, Hassing Nielsen and Sørensen 2012, p. 3), which further supports the first of the sceptical arguments.

### 8.3 Tilting the Agenda

Although, the Presidency's formal power position is constrained, there are still many ways to direct the decision-making players towards achieving national goals, which Denmark successfully showed (Official A, 2015; see also literature on previous Danish Presidencies: Magnúsdóttir 2010; or Bengtsson et al. 2004). This is mainly achieved by using the cognitive power resources, such as privileged information and close relationship with the Commission, while still remaining a good leader. Regardless of the size of the incumbent, the Presidency offers a privileged position in the EU's decision-making system, "which allows it to shape agenda items, advance or delay legislation, and initiate new policy debates" (Bunse 2009, p. 40). In the same manner, Tallberg (2003) introduces three ways of *agenda-shaping* in the Presidency: *agenda-setting*, *agenda-structuring*, and *agenda-exclusion*, meaning that the incumbent could introduce new issues accordingly on the policy agenda, emphasize or de-emphasize issues already on the agenda, or block issues from the agenda (p. 21). Based on the opinion of Official A (2016), Denmark uses the Presidency as an agenda-shaper, as it excludes or prioritises legislation based on its national preference (for example, environmental issues; see Chapter 4).

My case studies indicate that small states approach the Commission differently than larger ones, as they see the Commission as their guardian and ally (Official A 2016; also Thorhallsson 2006a; or Geurts 1998; or Magnúsdóttir 2010). This is indeed a quite common perception among small member states, "where the Commission is often considered an indispensable counter-weight to the predominance of large states in the EU supranational system" (Geurts 1998, p. 49). Magnúsdóttir (2010) claims that the close relationship with the Commission can be seen as a cognitive power resource, which small states can use in every stage (p. 284; see Chapter 2). Therefore, a good cooperation between the Commission and the incumbent state is an important factor among leadership qualities and can determine the success of the Presidency (Kirchner 1992, p. 110-111).

Denmark has certainly an intimate relationship with the Commission, which was also acknowledged by Official A (2016; see Chapter 4). Its good cooperation was used in the Danish Presidency in 2012 and was an essential factor in tilting the agenda in favour of the Danes. Latvia realised, thanks to its Presidency, how important it is to have a good relationship with the Commission and to initiate a dialog during the early stages of the legislation formation in order to build up influence (Official B 2016). Estonia, too, has acknowledged the importance of a good cooperation with the Commission (Official C 2016;

see Chapter 6), but it can still be observed that new member states have not yet had enough time and opportunities to shape an intimate relationship with the Commission and use it as a power resource.

#### **8.4 A Mixed Blessing**

Besides the opportunity to influence the agenda, either by using the relationship with the Commission or by the concepts introduced by Tallberg (2003), the Presidency represents several other advantages. One example, brought up by the Officials and supported by the existing literature, is the opportunity for the incumbent's public administration. In the framework of the Presidency, it is exposed to a unique insight to the EU machinery and gains an experience that will benefit the incumbent state even after the Presidency. It is true, however, that the public administration of small states is also considered a challenge due to the constant lack of human resources and expertise (Randma-Liiv 2002, p. 380; Magnúsdóttir 2010, p. 168). In day to day negotiations, because of their small administration, small states therefore have to prioritize between the sectors (Thorhallsson 2006a, p. 218). Moreover, due to their narrow interests, it is challenging to have an insight to all files brought by the Presidency (Official C 2016).

Nevertheless, as stated above, the experience will benefit the small states' administrations once the Presidency period is over, and their characteristics, such as "informality, flexible decision-making, greater room to maneuver for their officials, guidelines given to negotiators rather than instructions" (Thorhallsson 2006a, p. 218-219) will improve as well. The Nordic states, for example, are already blessed with an efficient and transparent administration, which can also be used as a cognitive power resource (Magnúsdóttir 2010, p. 293). For Latvia and Estonia, the Presidency brings them closer to achieving this goal.

The political situation in other member states, such as elections and referenda on EU issues, can also represent a challenge for an incumbent as it can have an impact on the Presidency's agenda-shaping capacity (Bunse 2009, p. 57; also Official A 2016; or Kirchner 1992, p. 93). Changes within the EU institutions can also affect the agenda, such as EP elections and the regular substitution of the Commission mandates. The Estonian Presidency in 2018 will be held prior to the EP elections and the appointment of a new Commission in 2019, which means that the MEPs and commissioners will want to show results at the time.

This is beneficial for Estonia, as the state plans to deliver as many results as possible during its Presidency (Official C 2016).

In Latvia's case, the newly elected MEPs meant a challenge, as they had not yet found their place in the institution, while the new head of the Commission had his own plans for the agenda (Official B 2016). Furthermore, the domestic elections can also be challenging for the Presidency, if they take place just before or during the Presidency (Official A 2016; Official B 2016; also Kirchner 1992, p. 96). Nevertheless, how the incumbent handles the change of government reflects upon its identity and commitment to the EU as "dislocating consequences of changes of government are less problematic for those countries in which a broad consensus on EC [EU] issues persists across political parties, than those in which distinctive party views obtain, or where attitudes towards the EC [EU] are evolving" (Wallace qtd. in Kirchner 1992, p. 96).

Finally, external unforeseeable events beyond the Presidency's control, and which require immediate attention, is another important challenge that tests the Presidency's capacity (Tallberg 2003, p. 20; also Official A 2016; Official B 2016; and Official C 2016): "Many presidencies have come into office with conscientiously and well-prepared agendas, only to find that the six months disappear in a haze of meetings on quite unexpected topics" (Heyes-Renshaw and Wallace qtd. in Tallberg 2003, p. 20). Latvia experienced such a challenging situation, as it had to deal with difficult issues such as the terror attacks in Paris and the migration crisis in the Mediterranean, already at the beginning of its Presidency (Official B 2016; see Chapter 5). Unforeseeable events represent a challenge to all incumbents, and their capacity to cope with it defines the success of their Presidency.

## 9 Conclusion

The Presidency offers incumbent states a unique opportunity to be at the centre of the EU's decision-making and to influence its politics. This position is especially important for small states, as their voice is often weak in the union. Therefore, how small states approach the Presidency is of great importance: do they exploit the power position of the Presidency to pursue their national interests and make their voice heard (Presidency as amplifier); or do they remain neutral as honest brokers and restrain their national interests in favour of the European common good (Presidency as silencer)? Furthermore, what challenges and opportunities do the Presidency represent to a small state? The aim of this thesis has been to investigate small EU member states and gather empirical findings that would help me answer these questions. Therefore, I chose to study three cases: Denmark, which held the Presidency in 2012; Latvia, which held the office in 2015; and Estonia, which is yet to hold its first Presidency in 2018.

Based on my empirical findings and analysis, I can conclude that although all three cases stressed the importance of being an honest broker and pursuing mutual European interests, and thus using the Presidency as a silencer, Denmark still stood out with its experience and expertise in using cognitive power resources to tilt the Presidency agenda in their national favour. Latvia and Estonia, on the other hand, approached (or plan to approach, in the latter case) the office of the Presidency with modest ambitions and rather silenced national interests. The reason for their choice of approach is the fact that they are relatively new EU members and inexperienced Presidency holders. Moreover, due to their new membership status and geographical position, how they identify themselves and how they are perceived by other member states is still in development and therefore, a successful Presidency is crucial for their identity. To take risks and to be overly ambitious seems to be unpopular among first time Presidency holders. With this said, there is an important gap in the study of small states and the Presidency, as there is a lack of research on (small states') first time Presidencies, despite the fact that the position as a novice seems to have a significant influence on the Presidency approach. Thereby, with this thesis, I hope to have made a small contribution to the research on first time Presidencies.

Concerning the challenges represented by the Presidency, they seem to be more or less the same for all small states, regardless of their membership status or experience. The main challenges are the capacity of a small administration; unforeseeable events, which determine the course of the Presidency and are impossible to plan for; and the domestic as



well as European political landscape, as national or European elections can have a significant influence on the Presidency agenda and decision-making. However, there are several challenges that are connected to the new membership status and lack of experience, as stated by the Latvian and Estonian officials, such as organisational challenges, logistical problems, and language barriers.

Regarding the opportunities provided by the Presidency, all three officials had similar opinions. First and foremost, the Presidency is an opportunity for the public administration as an education and unique experience, which will benefit the incumbent state even after the Presidency. A professional and transparent civil service is important to small states in particular, as it can later be used as a cognitive power resource. Furthermore, the Presidency provides career opportunities for individuals. Finally, the Presidency brings the holder into the spotlight and showcases the incumbent state to the EU, and vice versa, which supports its integration process.

The role of the Presidency has changed since the implementation of the Lisbon Treaty, which has had an effect on how the office is approached. As the Treaty reduced the power of the office even further, by creating new positions to share the chairmanship with, it is now more difficult for small states to use the Presidency in order to amplify their national interests. Therefore, further research on post-Lisbon Presidencies would greatly contribute to the field and offer new perspectives on how small states could benefit from the Presidency. As all of my cases are post-Lisbon Presidencies, I hope that I have contributed to a small degree to the research in this particular field. Nevertheless, the study of small states as holders of the Presidency requires more research, and there is plenty of potential research to be done, which could result in both practical and theoretical contributions to the political and academic spheres.

## 10 References

### Interviews

Interviews with government officials of Denmark, Latvia, and Estonia in March and April 2016 at:

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# 11 Appendices

## Appendix A: Interview Guide Denmark

Date: 2016-04-19

Place: Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs

Interviewer: Jana Bendel

Interviewee: Official A, Danish representative closely connected to the Danish Presidency in 2002 and 2012.

### 1 Definitions and Abbreviations

European Union Member States = hereinafter *Member States*

The Presidency of the Council of the European Union = hereinafter the *Presidency*

The European Commission = hereinafter the *Commission*

### 2 Interview Questions

#### 2.1 The Presidency

1. How would you define a successful Presidency?
2. What does the Presidency represent for Denmark?
3. Did Denmark take inspiration in its preparations for the Presidency from previous holders?
  - a. If yes, which ones?
  - b. Please provide examples!

#### 2.2 Opportunities and Challenges

4. What main opportunities did the Presidency offer?
  - a. Please state at least three examples!
5. What were the most important challenges facing Denmark during the Presidency?
  - a. Please state at least three examples!
6. How did Denmark benefit from the Presidency?
  - a. Please provide examples!

7. How did the EU benefit from the Presidency?

### **2.3 National Interests**

8. Were Denmark's national interests demonstrated during the Presidency?

9. How were the national interests of Denmark maximized?

10. Does Denmark have similar interests as other small Member States?

11. Do the interests of small Members States differ from those of larger Member States?

### **2.4 Cooperation**

12. How did Denmark cooperate with the Commission before, during, and after the Presidency?

a. Please provide examples!

13. Poland held the Presidency prior to Denmark, whereupon the Presidency was passed over to Cyprus. How did Denmark cooperate with Poland and Cyprus in its preparations for the Presidency, in the framework of the Trio Programme?



## **Appendix B: Interview Guide Latvia**

Date: 2016-04-14

Place: Embassy of the Republic of Latvia in the Kingdom of Denmark

Interviewer: Jana Bendel

Interviewee: Official B, Latvian government official in Denmark.

### **1 Definitions and Abbreviations**

European Union Member States = hereinafter *Member States*

The Presidency of the Council of the European Union = hereinafter the *Presidency*

The European Commission = hereinafter the *Commission*

### **2 Interview Questions**

#### **2.1 The Presidency**

1. How would you define a successful Presidency?
2. What does the Presidency represent for Latvia?
3. Did Latvia take inspiration in its preparations for the Presidency from previous holders?
  - a. If yes, which ones?
  - b. Please provide examples!

#### **2.2 Opportunities and Challenges**

4. What main opportunities did the Presidency offer?
  - a. Please state at least three examples!
5. What were the most important challenges facing Latvia during the Presidency?
  - a. Please state at least three examples!
6. How did Latvia benefit from the Presidency?
  - a. Please provide examples!
7. How did the EU benefit from the Presidency?

#### **2.3 National Interests**

8. Were Latvia's national interests demonstrated during the Presidency?

9. How were the national interests of Latvia maximized?
10. Does Latvia have similar interests as other small Member States?
11. Do the interests of small Members States differ from those of larger Member States?

#### **2.4 Cooperation**

12. How did Latvia cooperate with the Commission before, during, and after the Presidency?
  - a. Please provide examples!
13. Italy held the Presidency prior to Latvia, whereupon the Presidency was passed over to Luxembourg. How did Latvia cooperate with Italy and Luxembourg in its preparations for the Presidency, in the framework of the Trio Programme?

## **Appendix C: Interview Guide Estonia**

Date: 2016-03-02

Place: Government Office of Estonia, Tallinn

Interviewer: Jana Bendel

Interviewee: Official C, Estonian government official at the Department of European Affairs closely connected to the Estonian Presidency in 2018.

### **1 Definitions and Abbreviations**

European Union Member States = hereinafter *Member States*

The Presidency of the Council of the European Union = hereinafter the *Presidency*

The Trio Programme = a 18-month joint programme drafted by three successive EU Presidencies

### **2 Interview Questions**

#### **2.1 The Presidency**

1. How would you define a successful Presidency?
2. What does the Presidency represent for Estonia?
3. Does Estonia take inspiration in its preparations for the Presidency from previous holders?
  - a. If yes, which ones?
  - b. Please provide examples!

#### **2.2 Opportunities and Challenges**

4. What main opportunities did the Presidency offer?
  - a. Please state at least three examples!
5. What are the most important challenges facing Estonia during the Presidency?
  - a. Please state at least three examples!
6. How does Estonia benefit from the Presidency?
  - a. Please provide examples!
7. How does the EU benefit from the Presidency?
8. What would be the best outcomes for Estonia?

- a. Please provide examples!

### **2.3 National Interests**

9. Will Estonia's national interests be demonstrated during the Presidency?
10. How will the national interests of Estonia be maximized?
11. Does Estonia have similar interests as other small Member States?
12. Do the interests of small Members States differ from those of larger Member States?

### **2.4 The Trio Programme**

13. The UK will hold the Presidency prior to Estonia, whereupon the Presidency will be passed over to Bulgaria. How does Estonia cooperate with the UK and Bulgaria in its preparations for the Presidency, in the framework of the Trio Programme?
14. Does Estonia cooperate with the UK and Bulgaria, in its preparations for the Presidency, outside of the Trio Programme?