

Sub-state Entity Participation During the 2010 Presidencies of the EU Council

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Abstract The theoretical development in several social disciplines identifies a transformation of the functionality of sub-state governments. It has been argued that regions progressively acquire functions of representation, legitimacy, and governability within the state, not only at national but also at international scales. Furthermore, it has been claimed that the European Union (EU) rotating presidencies (which still coexists even with the entry into force of the Treaty of Lisbon) constitute such an interesting opportunity for the Member States to—during a 6-month period—highlight their own interests, at European scale, thus influencing the EU political agenda. Within this context, we will seek to underline how the Member States regional participation affects the different EU presidencies.

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

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impact of the regions on the presidency of the Council of the EU (the next presidencies of the EU for Spain and Belgium are scheduled in 2023).

Introduction

Much has been said around the introduction of the position of the president of the EU council once the Lisbon treaty has been ratified. The creation of this position and its mediatisation shadowed the fact that the system of the rotating presidency of the council will remain present and part of the institutional structures. Globally, the regions have a significant impact on the policies of the EU: directly and formally through the committee of the regions or due to their participation in the council or in the committees of the European commission, directly and informally through their representation offices in Brussels and their lobbying activities alone or joining and cooperating with other regions, or indirectly through the official mechanism and representation of their national state. The rotating presidencies are, in this regard, another opportunity for the regions to exert some influence on the European (and in some extent, national) policies.

This research intends to analyse the contributions of the regions to the various tasks and issues related to the presidencies of the European Union. The presidency constitutes for some regions a unique opportunity to give some light on their presence, main characteristics, and assets and to put their specific issues high on the political agenda. Regions from federal or highly decentralised states take the opportunity to emphasise during the presidency particular policies such as regional development, structural funds, culture and language, trade and education.

This article aims at analysing the factors that trigger or block the sub-national entities' participation within the rotating presidencies of the countries they belong to. Particularly, we will analyse the regional influence (and also the factors that promoted it) exerted by the 17 Spanish *Comunidades Autónomas* and the three regions and three communities in Belgium during the Spanish and Belgian presidencies in 2010. The comparative analysis will be used to identify the different organisational adaptations of the regional framework.

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

Through mainly an exhaustive events, codification and data collection (and also some interviews and key policy documents analysis), we will identify some

common patterns of regional influence on the decision-making process in the Council of the European Union, on other institutions and bodies, and on the overall priorities of the EU. Furthermore, we will be able to compare across countries and across different types of regions. Indeed, all analysed regions are not equal in autonomy, demographic weight, specific culture and language, wealth, or even geographic location. All these variables will be included in a global explanatory model in order to fully grasp the sometimes diverging characteristics of each region of Belgium and Spain and their influence of the EU through the rotating presidency of the Council.

Sub-state Mobilisation Within the Europeanisation Process

The regional phenomenon can be grasped through two different logics. We may distinguish the bottom-up one, on the one hand, and the top-down one, on the other hand. The first logic relational direction goes from the regional or sub-state level towards the state (regionalism); while the second logic goes, on the contrary, from the state towards the regional level (regionalisation). Both the *Third Level* and the *Multilevel Governance* theories should be also pointed out. Following the *Third Level* theory, the sub-national authorities enjoy a growing influence within the European model. In fact, their possibility not only to develop some of the capacities but also to reach a legal and political status within the EU institutional architecture has been recognised. Indeed, the *Third Level* concept refers to the sub-national entities' action and linkage within the EU framework, together with not only the first level (the European institutions) but also the second level (member states) (Tuñón 2009, p. 19). It is consequently not possible to deny the existence of this regional/third governance level and its influence, just below the member states and the EU. This level is often closer to the citizens and, most of the times, also more useful and efficient to carry out European policies. Therefore, the interaction between the *Third Level* and the (so-called) *Multilevel Governance* (MLG) leads to the fact that the European Governance is shared among different but interconnected levels and that the sub-national is the third one of them.

Hence, the EU appears as a new political dimension characterised by authority dispersion and competences shared among the different government levels. However, member states still play a predominant role in the European process. Nevertheless, they are obliged to confront with other actors that limit their action (Tuñón 2009, p. 21). The emergence of this MLG model (pioneered by Gary Marks 1993) is due to an extensive institutional building and decision-making (UE regions) reallocation process.

A well-known phenomenon within the comparative politics literature (since the 1990s) has also been the regional European activation. Hooghe (1995) first used the "sub-national mobilisation" concept, which has been regularly adopted by many other academics (for example, Claeys et al. 1998; Négrier and Jouve 1998; Keating 2004). It aimed to describe the performances of sub-national entities within the

European decision-making process. It was apprehended not only in its descendant dimension as mere “arenas” of European policies, but also its ascendant perspective seeking to become influential actors within the European process. Finally, Leonardo Morlino (Fargion et al. 2006), among others, contested this concept of sub-national mobilisation and proposed another concept: activation.

Through initiatives, actions, or decisions, the European regions seek to assure an active and visible presence at the EU level. It is impossible to deny that regions develop a vast European activation through different paths or mechanisms (Caciagli 2006, p. 220). The development of formal channels to involve the sub-national governments within the European decision-making process, the cooperation activities implemented within the interregional organisations framework (even outside the EU programmes), or the European regional offices set up in Brussels prove the European regional activation. These patterns constitute the sub-State reaction towards the new possibilities provided by the European framework: regional participation not only in the Committee of the Regions but also (to some extent) in the European Commission (through the *Comitology* system) and the Council of Ministers (Dandoy and Massart-Piérard 2005; Tuñón 2009).

Since the 1990s, the European sub-national entities have become conscious of the advantages offered by the increase of the access channels to the European Institutions. Regions realised the amount of influence they would be able to obtain within the design of European policies. Hence, regions have gradually established direct formulas to deal with Brussels, while they also have promoted non-direct or mediated—through their own states—mechanisms (Tuñón and Dandoy 2009; Tuñón 2010, 2011). Within the described framework, European regions cannot waste the growing participation opportunities offered by rotating presidencies to benefit from this mechanism. Regions are additionally allowed to give some light on their presence and to put their specific issues high on the European political agenda. Their member states are often being assisted in their tasks of organising the Council presidency, while many of them are perfectly ready to benefit from it and thus influence the EU decision-making process.

The Rotating Presidencies of the Council of the European Union During 2010

One of the major changes introduced by the Treaty of Lisbon has affected the rotating presidencies model. From the political perspective, many have pointed out the loss of influencing and lobbying opportunities due to the Lisbon reform (Beke 2011; Bunse et al. 2011). Some analyst even stated that the rotating presidency lost relevance and visibility (Molina 2010, 2011). Indeed, the nominations of the Council President and the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and the setting up of the TRIO model threats at least erode the visibility and influence of the country holding the rotating presidency. Although a period of

coordination and cohabitation between the rotating and the “permanent” presidencies might be needed, holding the rotating presidency still means “the possibility of exerting influence through, among other things, agenda-setting and external representation” (Bursens and Van Hecke 2011).

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

As it has been already been pointed out, the rotating presidencies constitute (also for the regions) an opportunity to set and manipulate the agenda, display initiatives, make broker agreements, show leadership, and/or represent the decision body vis-à-vis third parties (Bursens and Van Hecke 2011). Following the so-called Power of the chair theory (Tallberg 2006, 2007), “negotiation chairs generally benefit from privileged access to a set of important power resources, notably information and procedural control” (Tallberg 2007, p. 23).

Different analyses have pointed out from different perspectives many opportunities given by the rotating presidencies of the Council to exert—to some extent—some kind of influence; no hints have been found (to date) about the role of the sub-national entities. Within this context, the 2010 rotating presidencies of the Council have been held by both countries with federal or quasi-federal structures. The regional involvement in this process can be compared and contrasted. In addition, Spain and Belgium have been similarly affected by the implementation of the Treaty of Lisbon, on the one hand, and the worldwide economic crisis, on the other hand. Moreover, both countries have had to deal with relatively uncomfortable internal contexts. Indeed, the international economical crisis impact was harder in Spain where financial cuttings (even affecting the wages of the civil servants) in order to reduce the public debt were decided during the presidency. Nevertheless, internal situation in Belgium was not much better. The whole presidency had to be managed by a caretaker government since Belgian internal politics have prevented the formation of a federal government since June 2010 (Beke 2011).

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

Sub-state Participation During the 2010 Rotating Presidency

The rotating presidency of the European Union does not only mean exercising the formal presidency of ministers' meetings, but plenty of other events, activities, manifestations, etc., are also associated to this phenomenon. During the Spanish and Belgian presidencies (respectively January–June and July–December 2010), no less than 1,480 events specifically related to each individual presidency have been recorded.¹ These events were unequally spread over the two presidencies and covered various types of meetings (from European Council meetings to cultural events), various types of actors (from the UN representatives to local citizens associations or even individuals), and various issues (from foreign affairs to purely technical industrial processes).

Each event has therefore been coded into a category according to its type or its nature. Different categories have been distinguished. The three encompassing categories are the political meetings, the so-called non-political events and the cultural events. The first category consists in all political meetings organised by institutionalised actors and coded in subcategories, i.e., Council of Ministers meetings, European Council meetings, European parliament meetings, Permanent Representatives meetings, Officials and experts meetings, meetings with Third Countries, as well as informal meetings at the ministerial level. The second category of events regroups—under the label “Seminars and Conferences”—includes, mainly, the events organised by non-institutional actors (i.e., companies, lobbies, pressure groups, NGOs, universities, etc.) even in the presence of institutional or political actors, as well as scientific or vulgarisation conferences, workshops, seminars, forums, or congresses regarding specific aspects of the presidency and of the EU policies. The last category consists in various cultural events, such as exhibitions, museum collections, theatre, movies, concerts, dance performances, parties, etc.

In Table 1, we observe that the Spanish and the Belgian presidencies can be distinguished in terms of the amount of political meetings they organised. This type of meetings represents significantly more than the half of the Spanish presidency events, while it only accounts for 44.15 % of the total amount of events organised during the Belgian presidency. Variation is also observed as far as the number of seminars and conferences is concerned, but the country differences go into the opposite direction.

In Fig. 1, we observe a large variation of the absolute number of events organised per month. As expected, the months of January, July, and August witness fewer events than the other months due to the holidays at both EU and national levels. The same logic explains the small amount of events organised in December as the very last official meeting occurred on the 22 December 2010 (Coreper II

¹ The criteria for the event selection was either whether the event was organised directly in the framework of the presidency's activities, either whether it received the presidency “label” and was included in the official presidency calendar.

Table 1 Number of Presidency events (per category)

	Spanish presidency	Belgian presidency	Total
Political meetings	428 58.79 %	332 44.15 %	760 51.62 %
Seminars and conferences	112 15.38 %	206 27.39 %	318 21.22 %
Cultural events	156 21.43 %	166 22.07 %	322 21.76 %
Others	32 4.40 %	48 6.38 %	80 5.41 %
Total	728 100.00 %	752 100.00 %	1480 100.00 %

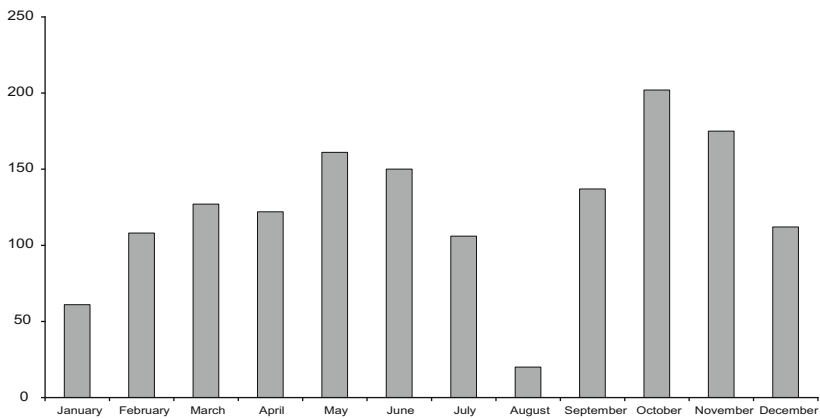


Fig. 1 Number of Presidency events (per month)

meeting). The core moment of the Spanish presidency is therefore rather evenly spread over 5 months, while the Belgian one occurred for 3 months (from September to November), with a peak on October 2010 with no less than 202 events organised in the framework of the Belgian presidency.

Finally, the location of the events was included in the database (city–region–country), allowing us to investigate the degree of activism of the regional actors, compared to the one of the federal actors. In other words, we grasp the capacity of a political entity to organise presidency events by assessing the amount of events organised on its territory. We observe that the large majority of the events are taking place on the Belgian territory: 880 events, i.e., 59.5 % of all presidency events in 2010. No less than 600 events took place in other countries, among which 464 were in Spain (31.4 %). Surprisingly, only six events have been organised in Hungary, the partner country of both Spain and Belgium in the framework of the Trio Presidency.

Table 2 Number of Presidency events organised in Spain and Belgium, per region

Spain	<i>N</i>	Percentage (%)	Belgium	<i>N</i>	Percentage (%)
Andalucía	56	12.10	Bruxelles	476	70.62
Aragón	11	2.38	German-speaking community	8	1.19
Asturias	11	2.38	Vlaanderen	107	15.88
Balearic Islands	11	2.38	Wallonie	83	12.31
Basque Country	7	1.51			
C. Valenciana	12	2.59			
Canary Islands	7	1.51			
Cantabria	3	0.65			
Castilla la Mancha	10	2.16			
Castilla y León	23	4.97			
Catalonia	37	7.99			
Extremadura	8	1.73			
Galicia	15	3.24			
La Rioja	1	0.22			
Madrid	245	52.92			
Murcia	3	0.65			
Navarre	3	0.65			

Among the 464 events organised in Spain and the 880 events in Belgium, no less than 1,138 of them could be related to a specific region. Missing data is due to the lack of specification on the exact location of the event or to the fact that events are sometimes simultaneously organised in more than one region. Distributing the events per region unsurprisingly confirms that the two capital regions attract the majority of the events: 476 events in Brussels and 245 in Madrid. As previously stated, the status of capitals of, respectively, Spain and Belgium and, in the latter case, of the seat of the European Union, explain to a larger extent why these events are organised in such regions. As shown in Table 2, the events organised outside these two regions mostly take place in Flanders (107 events), followed by Wallonia (83 events) and Andalusia (56 events).

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

Among these 1,231 non-institutionalised and non-routine events, the proportion of events organised outside the Spanish and Belgian territories is slightly larger even if cultural and economic events were poorly organised outside these two countries in the framework of the EU presidency. However, more interesting is

the fact the share of events organised in the two capital regions (Madrid and Brussels) is smaller, with respectively 40.4 % and 61.1 % of all Spanish and Belgian events. The focus on solely non-institutionalised and non-routine events thus reinforces the presence and impact of the regions on the Presidency process.

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

In this last section, we integrate the different variables in a larger model in order to confirm our main hypothesis regarding the fact that stronger/larger regions use the Presidency as an opportunity and a tool for recognition. We operationalised the strength/size of a region in different ways: in terms of population (number of inhabitants), territorial size (number of square kilometres), density of population, wealth (GDP per capita), and constitutional autonomy (following the regional authority index built by Hooghe et al 2010). Among these size variables, only the population variable is proven to be significant with all Presidency events (correlation of 0.692**), with only non-institutionalised and non-routine events (0.689**) and with only cultural and conference-like events (0.667**). No other variable is significant, meaning that the size of a region, its wealth, or even its status of “special region” (as in the case of Catalonia, Basque Country, Galicia or Andalucía) does not play a role in the presidency process.

Finally, negative binomial regression models (Table 3) indicate that only one independent variable explains the number of Presidency events organised in one region. Confirming correlation figures, the population variable is significantly (and positively) related to the number of Presidency events. More events will be organised in more populated regions, independently of their size, their wealth, their degree of autonomy, or their constitutional status.

Conclusions

Presidencies of the EU are unique opportunities for a country to demonstrate its capacity and skills chairing and organising the European arena. Besides this formal task of articulating the European debate, presidencies also allow various actors

Table 3 Negative binomial regression of the amount of events

		Model
Regional variables	Status	0.176 (0.122)
	Size	1.294 (5.054)
	Population	1.996** (4.857)
	Density	-0.82 (0.114)
	PIB	-1.416 (2.623)
Control variables	Country	1.094 (0.4739)
	Capital	2.816** (2.816)
	Constant	-0.723 (1.588)
	Negative binomial	0.041 (0.037)
	Pearson Chi ²	25.575
	Log likelihood	-68.899
	Observations	21

Note: *Significant at 0.05 level; **significant at 0.01 level

(political, socio-economic, academic, civil society, etc.) to express their voice and opinion or merely their existence. This article analysed the occurrence of the so-called presidency events by taking into account different variables. The collected data allowed us to evaluate the presence and dynamism of each political actor and policy level in the framework of the 12-month Spanish and Belgian presidencies. The conclusions are threefold.

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

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

Finally, EU presidencies are composed of a variety of organised events. These events can take the form of various formal and institutional political meetings such as Council meetings or European Parliament plenary sessions, as well as many other activities from seminar and conferences to numerous cultural events, such as exhibitions or concerts. Our results demonstrate that regions do not use these two

latter types of events in order to compensate the lack of political visibility for their region. Strong regions manage, at the same time, to attract political meetings to be held in their region (for example, an informal meeting of the council of ministers), as well as a larger amount of cultural events and conferences, meetings, seminars, etc.

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