The Limited Role of the Council Presidency After Lisbon – Much Ado About Nothing?

Abstract: The Lisbon Treaty has introduced numerous changes to the shape and role of the Council Presidency. However, it seems that the actual effect of those changes is not so big as might appear from the text of the Treaty. While a legal and institutional analysis of the Presidency on the basis of the Treaty of Lisbon gives a clear picture of the significantly changed role, quantitative and qualitative empirical research conducted by the author among officials involved in the Presidencies of Spain and Belgium do not fully confirm this picture. This article aims at analysing the reasons and manifestations of certain discrepancies between the planned shape and powers of the Council Presidency in the Treaty of Lisbon and its actual role in practice.

Introduction

The Lisbon Treaty has introduced numerous changes to the shape and role of the Council Presidency. However, it seems that the actual effect of those changes is not as big as it might appear from the text of the Treaty. Why is this so? There are at least three major reasons, namely: 1) Despite the fact that formally the Presidency now shares many of its powers with the High Representative and the President of the European Council, in practice these institutions have so far only partly reduced the powers of the Presidency, mainly due to the fact that both Herman van Rompuy and Catherine Ashton (particularly the latter) lack charisma, time, and legitimacy; 2) The administrative and organizational burdens on the Member State holding the Presidency have remained at a similar level, or perhaps even grown (despite giving away some of their powers), which has mobilised them to take a useful
and active role in support of the European interest, while not neglecting national interests; 3) The Presidency Trio has supported and authenticated both the legitimacy as well as professional approach of the Presidency towards setting the EU legislative agenda and organising the EU’s activities on a year-and-a-half basis (i.e. the combined duration of the three Presidencies). The Trio has remained a set of three consecutive Presidencies – not a separate formation.

This article aims at providing readers with some evidence supporting the above-mentioned claims, as well as at shifting the scientific discourse about the changed role of the Council Presidency from literal analysis of and adherence to the text of the Treaty of Lisbon to the actual changes manifested, both at the European and national levels. These aims will be achieved by comparison of the Treaty provisions and the actual practice since their implementation, as well as analysis of quantitative and qualitative research conducted by the author among officials of the national administrations involved in the Presidencies of Spain and Belgium. It is worth underlining that the research will play only a supportive role in the article, and its full analysis is available upon request to the author.

There is one more aspect of the role of Presidency following the entry into force of the Treaty of Lisbon, namely the efficiency of conducting the Presidency, both on the national and European levels. This aspect is also analysed in this article, however only partially and then in the light of the most important changes introduced by the Treaty.

The thesis of this article is the following: not as much has changed since the entry into force of the Treaty of Lisbon, in terms of Presidency’s importance and the way it is treated in practice by the Member States holding it, as was expected by the European legislators. However, the perception of the changes in the role of the Presidency in the Member States (mainly among officials involved in the Presidency, i.e. politicians) and in the EU institutions (among eurocrats) seems to confirm the perceived significance of the changes.

1. Formal and actual limitations on the Presidency’s powers

The Treaty of Lisbon introduced completely new principles for conducting the Council Presidency. Implementation of these principles began with the preparatory activities commenced in 2006, when the Council adopted new Regulations under which the Presidency gained a rotating character and became the joint task of a group of Member States (the so-called Presidency Trio, consisting of three Member States holding consecutive Presiden-
cies). However, it was the Lisbon Treaty which formally changed the role of the Presidency, imposing limitations on it by the creation of two new important positions: the President of the European Council and the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy. The competencies assigned to these newly created posts were supposed to limit the existing powers of the Presidency, and only in some cases were they to delegate their powers to the Presidency.

Changes in the role of the Council Presidency introduced by the Lisbon Treaty are included in both its parts: the Treaty on the European Union (TEU) and the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU). In addition, a reference to the new role of the Presidency is contained in Declaration no. 9 to the Treaty – directly related to Article 16 of the TUE. This is connected with the European Council’s decision on the exercise of the Council Presidency, annexed to the Final Act of the Intergovernmental Conference of 2007. The new shape and role of the Presidency is also regulated by the European Council Decision of 1 December 2009, establishing the list of Council configurations and complementary compositions referred to in Article 16.6 of the Treaty, and repealing the Council Regulation of 15 September 2006.

Significant changes in the context of the post-Lisbon situation arise from Declaration no. 8, relating to the practical measures to be taken after the entry into force of the Treaty of Lisbon with respect to the Presidency of the Council and the Foreign Affairs Council. This Declaration discusses the important issue of how to cooperate with the newly elected presidents of the institutions introduced by the Lisbon Treaty in the first period after its entry into force, providing that: ‘In the situation of entry into force of the Treaty of Lisbon after 1 January 2009, the conference encourages competent authorities of the Member State holding the Presidency of the Council, as well as the person elected as a President of the European Council and the person appointed High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, to take, in consultation with the Member State which will hold the forthcoming Presidency, the necessary specific measures allowing for the efficient hand-

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over of the Presidency of the European Council and the Presidency of the Council of Foreign Affairs in terms of content and organization.\(^5\)

Under Article 16 paragraph 9 of the TEU, the Presidency of the Council configurations, with the exception of the Foreign Affairs Council, shall be held on the basis of equal rotation of representatives of the Member States in the Council, under the conditions established in accordance with Article 236 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union. Article 236 of the TFEU states that the European Council shall adopt, by a qualified majority:

a) a decision establishing the list of Council configurations, other than the General Affairs Council and Foreign Affairs Council, in accordance with Article 16, paragraph 6 of the Treaty on European Union;

b) a decision on the Presidency of the Council configurations, with the exception of the Foreign Affairs Council, in accordance with Article 16, paragraph 9 of the Treaty on European Union.\(^6\)

The Lisbon Treaty provides for substantial and meaningful changes with respect to the role of the Council Presidency, particularly in the field of the EU foreign policy. However, there remains the large question whether the new construction contained in the Lisbon Treaty has indeed affected actual policy-making and daily policy outcomes in this field? Has the High Representative revolutionised the EU’s foreign policy and limited the powers of the Presidency?\(^7\)

Numerous analyses of the powers of the High Representative, which include establishing the agenda of the Foreign Affairs Council, chairing it, being a member of the European Commission, and creating and supervising the European External Action Service, have indicated that the powers are too great for one official.\(^8\) What’s more, the vast number of Catherine Ashton’s tasks has aggravated the problems associated with the creation and financing of the European External Action Service. Opposition towards Ashton’s proposal in that regard was presented in Cordoba and Strasburg, as a result of which she had to justify the form and scope of the Service in front of different EU institutions and Member States, which consumed a lot of her valuable time. Taking into account the fact that Javier Solana, who held the post before Ashton, worked 100 hours a week on average, it seems reasonable to

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conclude that without a reasonable delegation of part of the competences to the Presidency, Ashton’s actions in all the various roles assigned to her by the Treaty can hardly be efficient. And although a delegation of her powers does cause some competence chaos, it *de facto* means that the Council Presidency would continue to retain real meaning in the area of the EU’s foreign policy and foreign affairs, despite the formal limitations on it included in the Lisbon Treaty. An interesting example in this regard is presented by Spain, which formally lost its leading role in the European Council as a result of implementation of the Treaty of Lisbon, but still chaired 9 out of 10 formations of the European Council, except for the Foreign Affairs Council.

2. Changes in the administrative efforts of the Member State holding the Presidency after the Treaty of Lisbon

As section 1 of this article has shown, the Presidency’s task is to effectively organise the work of the Council during a six-month period, which requires considerable administrative effort. It turns out, however, that the changes in the perception of the Presidency and in the efforts made by those states which have held it following the entry into force of the Treaty of Lisbon have not been so great. This is proven by the results of quantitative and qualitative studies carried out by the author in the years 2011–2012 among workers of the institutions in Spain and Belgium which were involved in the Presidency. The study was anonymous; in Spain, ten officials of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs were studied using the quantitative method (an online survey), and for Belgium eight officials were included in the study. In addition, qualitative interviews were conducted with the officials of the Spanish and Belgian Ministries of Foreign Affairs (two directors for each department). The interviews are described and analysed below.

In response to the question: *Do you think the importance of Member State Presidency in the European Union changed after the Lisbon Treaty came into force?*, 100% of the Belgian officials noticed a change in the importance, but only 57% of the respondents could definitely see such changes and 43% answered ‘rather yes’. This concerns the level of practical realization of the Presidency in Belgium, and further answers demonstrated that the changes are not as significant as it may follow from the text of the Treaty of Lisbon.

As the studies show, the Belgians did not have any significant problems in realizing the European interest within the framework of their Presidency, or putting aside their national interest for that period. One of the officials involved in the Belgian Presidency, who gave an interview as part of the qualitative studies, even said that the Presidency was a special time in the
coordination of European policy in a Member State, when the state should forget about its national interests and aim only at achieving the goals of European integration. This would not apply, of course, in an exceptionally comfortable situation when the interests of the state holding the Presidency and of the EU are coincident. The interviewed Belgian official admitted that Belgium was quite close to that ‘comfortable’ model, especially given that the President of the European Council was a Belgian with permanent contacts within the Belgian national administration.9

In the opinion of the respondents, the biggest difficulties during the Belgian Presidency were organizational and logistic issues, particularly those related to the efforts connected with adjusting the previous organization of the Presidency to the assumptions of the Treaty of Lisbon. This was mentioned by 71% of the respondents.

Interesting answers were obtained to the question concerning those areas of national public administration which Belgian Presidency influenced the most. The particular question in this respect was: Out of the following areas of functioning of public administration, choose not more than 3 which in your opinion were most influenced by the Presidency. The chart 1 shows the distribution of the most often selected answers.

Chart 1.

Areas of functioning of the national public administration influenced by the Council Presidency

- Bigger influence of politics on administration
- Better management
- Better division of tasks among the officials
- Better coordination of every-day activities

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9 The person who gave the interview was Peter van Kemseke, the diplomatic advisor of the Belgian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Stephen Vanackere. The interview was conducted on 26 April 2012.
Undoubtedly, the changes introduced by the Lisbon Treaty were important in the process of preparation for exercising the Presidency, as 57% of the answers to one of the study questions: What part of the training sessions referring to the Presidency was devoted to changes introduced by the Lisbon Treaty, indicated that ‘the issue got a lot of attention during the training sessions’. Moreover, 57% of the respondents gave a positive answer to the question: Were the priorities of Belgium’s Presidency in the EU determined with consideration of the changes introduced by the Lisbon Treaty?, and none of the respondents gave a negative answer (43% of the respondents said it was hard to say).

An interesting outcome of the study was the very high percentage (86%) of negative answers to the question: Were the experiences of the previous Presidencies of other countries presented during the training sessions referring to the Presidency?. This suggests, as was confirmed in the qualitative interviews with officials of the Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, that the Belgians considered the new conditions surrounding the Presidency as so different to the previous ones that drawing on other countries’ experiences would have been useless. Further answers, however, did not fully confirm the assumption that such a high importance was attached to the post-Lisbon changes. The distribution of the answers to the next two questions concerning particular changes introduced by the Lisbon Treaty shows that they were not as significant as the respondents claimed in their answers to the general questions. These questions were: Was the preparation to the Presidency related in any way to the existence of Presidency Trios?, and Was your preparation to the Presidency related in any way to the existence of new offices: the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and the President of the European Council?.

Chart 2.

Was the preparation to the Presidency related to the existence of the Presidency Trio?

- Yes
- No
- Difficult to say
The statements of the officials participating in the qualitative study of the Belgian Presidency included opinions that the Presidency Trio was not very important. This was also confirmed by the results of the quantitative studies, as more than half of the respondents could not see any particular post-Lisbon importance of the Presidency Trio.

Chart 3.

As the chart 3 above shows, slightly more than a half of the respondents had encountered issues concerning the new offices of the President of the European Council and the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy in preparation to the Presidency, but it had no significant consequences for the mode of preparation.\(^\text{10}\) This is definitely less than might be expected taking into consideration the fact that these new institutions were supposed to limit the Presidency in its most crucial areas.

Finally, it is worth quoting the terms most often used to describe the Belgian Presidency.

There is no doubt that all the respondents considered the Belgian Presidency to be effective, even though it was carried out in the new conditions resulting from the adoption of the Treaty of Lisbon. Apparently, for the Belgians the conditions were not a reason for changing their previous attitude

\(^{10}\) This statement was repeated in all the interviews being part of the qualitative study: with Peter van Kemseke, Isabelle Raes and Christian van der Hove. The interviews with these persons were conducted on 26 April 2012 in Brussels.
towards exercising the Presidency, which is reflected, for example, in their way of preparing to preside over the European Union.

The Spanish officially started their process of preparing for the Presidency in March 2008, but it must be emphasised that a lot of preparation work (e.g. training sessions) had taken place before that time. Preparation for the Presidency reportedly cost the Spanish about 97 million Euros, which was more than twice as much as Spain had spent preparing for the Presidency in 2002.11 At the national level, a special Support Unit (“Unidad de Apoyo”) was created as part of the Spanish central administration. Its purpose was not only to support the Spanish officials working on the upcoming Presidency from the organizational point of view, but also to support the government in realizing national ambitions within the framework of the Presidency, in spite of the disadvantageous changes introduced by the Lisbon Treaty.12

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the results of the quantitative and qualitative studies of the officials’ attitudes to the post-Lisbon changes show that the Spanish de facto implemented the post-Lisbon changes even less than the Belgians did. Instead, they recognised them more as a necessity, which formally should be treated seriously but in practice could be ignored. This is indicated, inter alia, by the study results presented below.

The results include the answers received from ten heads of departments of the Spanish Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The questionnaire included the same set of questions as in the study in Belgium.

The following chart shows the distribution of the answers concerning the officials’ opinions on the Presidency after the Lisbon Treaty coming into force (the question was: Do you think the importance of the Member State Presidency in the European Union changed after the Lisbon Treaty came into force?).

Chart 5.

As we can see, the Spanish officials felt the impact of the provisions of Lisbon Treaty with respect to the importance of Presidency more than the Belgian ones, which may partly result from the fact that Spain was the first state to hold the Presidency in the new conditions. However, further questions showed that although there was a general conviction that the post-Lisbon changes were important, basically they did not affect the actual Spanish attitude to the Presidency.

To the next question of the study, asking whether officials had been prepared for the Presidency with consideration of the new situation resulting from the Lisbon Treaty (What part of the training sessions referring to the
Presidency was devoted to changes introduced by the Lisbon Treaty?) 56% of the respondents answered: ‘the issue received average attention during the training sessions,’ while 11% of the respondents answered that the issue had received a lot of attention and the same number stated that the training sessions in fact had been devoted solely to that topic. This result is very similar to the one obtained in the Belgian study. What’s important is that 100% of the respondents answered that the priorities of the Presidency had been set taking into consideration the assumptions of the Treaty of Lisbon, which differs from the result obtained in the study of Belgian officials, where only 57% of the respondents answered that the priorities had been set taking into consideration the assumptions of the Treaty.

An interesting result of the study is the fact that 44% of the Spanish respondents stated that experiences of other states had been considered in preparation to the Presidency. This is difficult to interpret, given that the Spanish Presidency was the first to be held under the new conditions, so drawing on examples of Presidencies of states that had completely different legal situations and much greater opportunities and independence in setting priorities during the course of the Presidencies would not seem very useful.

Certain divergences in the answers of Spanish and Belgian respondents are also visible in the context of their consideration of the new offices of the President of the European Council and the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy in preparation for the Presidency. The divergences in results are presented in the chart below.

Chart 6.
The chart above indicates that Spain – not knowing yet how significant the actual changes in the institutional construction of the EU would be after entry into force of the Treaty of Lisbon – made an effort to prepare officials for efficiency in their activities in the new conditions, while Belgium officials had already drawn the conclusion that the changes hadn’t been large enough to cause particular concern, and certainly not panic.

The last question pertained to the words most often chosen by the respondents to describe the Spanish Presidency of the Council of the European Union. The Spanish, a little more modestly than the Belgians, called their Presidency helpful; the term ‘taking up the challenge’ was also quite popular, which is somewhat surprising since the Spanish Presidency was accused of realizing its national interest at all cost.

3. The Presidency Trio – enhancement of the European approach towards the Presidency?

One of the most significant changes in the Presidency brought about by the Lisbon Treaty was to sanction the Presidency Trio as a kind of counterbalance to the weakening of the significance of the Presidency from the point of view of the individual Member States. The first Presidency Trio that was fully subject to the Lisbon Treaty, valid since December 2009, was the set of countries consisting of Spain, Belgium and Hungary. Earlier, commencing with the moment of establishing the institution of a Trio, the first three states to constitute a Presidency Trio were Germany, Slovenia and Portugal, and then France, the Czech Republic and Sweden (from the second half of 2008). Those countries, however, did not cooperate as intensively as the first Trio officially working on the basis of the Treaty of Lisbon.

It’s important to note that the Lisbon Treaty does not mention the Presidency Trio expressis verbis, but it includes information on the group of three Member States established in advance, as does the Declaration accompanying the Treaty, confirming the formation of a Trio. The Declaration was implemented by decision of the European Council in relation with the Treaty coming into force, which is not without significance to the existence of the Presidency Trio, as in such a legal context the European Council could theoretically change its decision some day in the future.

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13 See: Article 16 par. 9 of the Treaty of Lisbon, op.cit.
14 See: op.cit.
15 See: Article 236 of TFUE, Treaty of Lisbon, op.cit.
Some elements of the change in the attitude to the Presidency in connection with the Treaty of Lisbon are visible on the basis of a comparative evaluation of the functioning of a Presidency Trio before and after the Treaty came into force. The changes are not very noticeable, but thorough studies of the assumptions and priorities of the Trio, the way of its functioning, and the states’ cooperation within its framework do reveal some changes. For example, the Trio of France, the Czech Republic and Sweden jointly developed the Trio’s priorities and tried to make the impression that over their year-and-a-half of presiding over the Union they constituted a kind of counterbalance to some Member States, in particular France and Germany, which were viewed as something close to a separate formation (dubbed ‘Merkozy’), as well as to the Commission and the Parliament as institutions put to the test during the period of economic crisis and the introduction of the new, Lisbon order.¹⁶

First of all, the French-Czech-Swedish Trio proved that the Trio’s composition and the individual ambitions of its particular states are very important to its activities and way of functioning. The presence of France meant that the Trio’s priorities, and their realization, were quite strongly dependent on French European policy, which was rather aimed at bilateral relations between France and its European partners (particularly within the framework of the ‘central six,’ which was to be responsible for the foreign policy of the EU, i.e.: France, Germany, Great Britain, Italy, Spain and Poland). Importantly, if the Trio had issues that might be problematic for Germany listed among its priorities; the French were ready to sacrifice their role in the Trio and cooperation as part of the Trio for the sake of good relations with Germany. One example can be cited: the question of creating the Mediterranean Union, to which Angela Merkel did not agree.¹⁷

It seems that in the context of the post-Lisbon changes, the Presidency Trio became less oriented towards the formal planning of initiatives and setting priorities, and more oriented towards skilful communication and emergency management in unexpected situations, which were hard to manage skilfully by one state – i.e. the one holding Presidency. The example of the Czech Republic, concerning the necessity of its cooperation with the other states of the Presidency Trio in the face of unexpected crises (the crisis in the Gaza Strip and the natural gas crisis) illustrates the problem of preparing the Trio states for such cooperation and information exchange. Chaotic Czech attempts to gain support from different sides showed that before the Presi-

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¹⁷ Ibid., p. 8.
dency Trio was established, the principles of cooperation in situations requiring urgent intervention or emergency management had not been arranged effectively between the states of the Trio, despite jointly establishing the priorities and directions of the Presidency. What’s more French ambitions, while the Czech Republic held the Presidency, regarding participation in resolving the Gaza Strip conflict caused tensions which put the sense of cooperation within the Trio up in the air. This situation can be compared with the Trio of Spain, Belgium and Hungary, which – although it acted in an equally unpredictable international situation, with fluctuating markets and other problems – established the principles of cooperation on the basis of the Lisbon Treaty more clearly than the previous Trio and tried to determine in detail the principles and mode of cooperation with the High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and the President of the European Council. Moreover, this further confirms the principle that when the situation is less predictable, the principles of division of responsibility are better developed and more important than the post-Lisbon changes themselves, in order to avoid problems with reacting to difficult situations. It is also important that the smaller Member States consider it their obligation as part of the Presidency to be willing to sacrifice their particular interests for the good of the European interests, which confirms that the post-Lisbon order slightly increased the role of the smaller states and the Presidency Trio in European issues, while weakening the prospects of realizing national interests during a Member State’s Presidency.

At this point reference should be made to the German-Portuguese-Slovenian Presidency Trio. Researchers often describe it as something that existed mainly due to the exchange of officials between its Member States. What’s more, the cooperation of the Trio states mainly occurred in the phase before the beginning of the first Presidency, and in fact we can speak about a transfer of know-how from Germany to Slovenia and Portugal, and the state most active in looking for counsel and solutions as well as best practices for the period of its Presidency was Slovenia. So we can say that before the Treaty

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21 Cf. Materials from a workshop titled: *First time Hungarian presidency, first time in a trio*, organized by the Hungarian Europe Society and the Centre for Enlargement Studies, Central European University, Budapest, 29–30 October 2010.
of Lisbon came into force, especially in the initial period of the Trio’s operation, it served the purpose of enhancing the knowledge, administrative skills and abilities of officials in states holding the Presidency for the first time.\(^{22}\)

That aspect of the functioning of the Trio – although not entirely intended – was confirmed by the representatives of Belgium, who were most active within the Trio in cooperation with Hungary, a country which held Presidency for the first time.

One of the high Belgian officials involved in the Presidency said that the Presidency Trio was only a pretence, and that before the Lisbon Treaty came into force the formal requirements had not been so high and there had been no need to consult so many actions with the newly-created offices of the High Representative and the President of the European Council.\(^{23}\) What’s interesting is that while researchers are of the opinion that the Trio should cooperate most intensively for the good of the less experienced states, without previous experience in holding Presidency, this does not follow from the Treaty but rather from practical reasons.\(^{24}\) After the Lisbon Treaty, the role of the Presidency Trio definitely increased, but more in terms of formalities than in reality. It seems that a Trio is an artificial formation created for the purpose of disciplining the states holding the Presidency so that they will not excessively pursue their national interests, but it may become more important as one of the factors facilitating deepening European integration and bringing closer the varied interests of European Member States.

Quite an interesting and unexpected result of the study was the perception that the Presidency Trio had hardly any impact on the way Belgium exercised its Presidency (the question posed was: *Do you think the way of Belgium exercising its Presidency was dependent on the composition and activities of the so-called Presidency Trio?*). Over 71% of the respondents were of the opinion that the Trio rather did not influence the way of exercising the Belgian Presidency, 14% said it did not have any impact at all, and 14% were not sure. The Spanish respondents on the other hand indicated a strong dependence between the way of exercising Presidency and the composition and activities of the Trio. As many as 78% of the respondents found such a dependence, but probably this high percentage resulted from the fact that a lot was being said about the Trio at that time. The chart below illustrates some of the differences in the way of perceiving the Trio’s influence on the Presidency in Spain and in Belgium.

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\(^{23}\) Ibidem, p. 7.

Despite Spain’s efforts to demonstrate the importance of the Trio in setting the priorities of its Presidency, in fact it played a peripheral role in defining the rotational Presidency, as cooperation within its framework was mainly technical in nature.25

Chart 7.

4. The Rotating Presidency after Lisbon – more efficient than before Lisbon?

The issue of the effectiveness of Presidency is only seemingly much analysed by specialists, as usually it is identified with the success or failure of the Presidency, not with its real effectiveness.26 Effectiveness, in turn, is a term derived mainly from the field of economics, meaning the rationality of a particular activity from the point of view of the relation between expenditures and the results achieved.27 The lower the expenditure incurred for the achievement of particular results, the higher the efficiency. Thus the most important question analysing the efficiency of the post-Lisbon Presidency is:

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What results do we have in mind? The results for the state holding Presidency or for the whole Union? The issues of changes in the perception of the effectiveness of Presidency after the Treaty of Lisbon are mostly related to the conviction that the Presidency is effective when it realises the European interest instead of the particular national interests of individual Member States. For example, a representative of the Belgian governmental administration who actively participated in exercising the Belgian Presidency said that none of the Member States aiming at the realization of particular national interests as part of the Presidency ever completed it really effectively. Therefore, the Belgian Presidency ‘forgot’ about the particular interests of Belgium and concentrated on the European issues, regardless of how strong was their impact on Belgium.\textsuperscript{28} Against the background of presenting the Presidency before the Treaty of Lisbon as an exceptional opportunity to realise particular national interests at the European Forum and creating opportunities to show and realise a country’s priorities in the European arena, the declaration that during the Presidency a state should forget its particular interests and concentrate solely on the European interest is difficult to understand. However, it seems true to a great extent if we take into consideration the evaluation of different Presidencies made by significant Brussels officials – the President of the European Commission or the head of the European Council – which shows a markedly higher assessment if the state holding the Presidency did not try so much to use it for its particular purposes.\textsuperscript{29}

Despite the fact that both the Spanish and the Belgian Presidencies were conducted in the shadow of internal problems existing in both states (Belgium was going through a governmental crisis and Spain fought with a severe economic crisis), their style was very different, and in fact one of them (Belgium) was considered by the eurocrats (in official speeches by Barroso but also expressed during informal meetings) as the more efficient, while the other (Spain) was assess as inefficient.\textsuperscript{30} The reason for this ‘European’ assessment does not lie in the number of Presidency priorities realised, nor in the number of successful initiatives outside the European Union or in the way the state was viewed internationally. It is due to the fact that Belgium

\textsuperscript{28} Information received in an interview with Peter van Kemseke, the diplomatic advisor of the Deputy Prime Minister of Belgium, Steven Vanackere, conducted on 26 April 2012.


was more susceptible to the influence of the newly created institutions of the High Representative and of the President of the European Council (mostly because the latter was a Belgian), and unlike Spain it didn’t try to use the Presidency to implement national interests. However, most of the Member States are not in such a comfortable situation as Belgium from that point of view. Therefore, it seems from that the most important indicator of the efficiency of a Presidency on the basis of the Treaty of Lisbon is striking a balance between the implementation of some national interests and being a country strongly supportive of the European interest (and able to give up national interests when necessary). This is probably the most significant change in the role of the Presidency in its post-Lisbon shape.

Closing remarks

Since the entry into force of the Treaty of Lisbon, politicians of the Member States holding the Council Presidency speak about their role while using terms fewer and fewer terms like ‘effective’, ‘visible in the international arena’, or ‘taking up the challenge’ (such statements were used by the Swedish authorities), and more often using words like: ‘discreet’, ‘humble’, ‘helpful’ (words of the Spanish Minister of Foreign Affairs). The question is whether the rhetoric reflects a real difference and whether the Presidency has really lost as much of its meaning as it is asserted on the basis of the Treaty of Lisbon? This article has attempted to analyse some aspects of two of the Presidencies: the Spanish and the Belgian Presidencies, with a view toward confirming or denying this statement. With no clear result emergent on the issue, the article has pointed out some discrepancies between the legal basis for the ‘new shape’ of the Presidency and the actual manifestations of its changed role.