

News coverage of the first Polish presidency of the Council of the European Union (2011): Findings from an international comparative study



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ABSTRACT: This article presents the main findings of an international comparative project on the news coverage of the Polish EU presidency (2011). The study examines the coverage of Poland that for the first time held the leading position in the EU Council within a new institutional context. The findings presented a stem from the analysis of six countries: Austria, Belgium, Germany, Greece, Poland, and Romania, following a mixed-method approach, combining quantitative and qualitative methods of content analysis. The results suggest that Poland's presidency did not change the thematic focus of the news reporting on Poland, neither in other EU countries nor in Poland. The patterns of international and domestic news were not affected significantly by EU-related events but remained shaped by news values of relevance and deviance. In general, Poland was portrayed in a neutral way with rather limited visibility which is related to the then dominant coverage of the Eurozone crisis.

KEYWORDS: International news coverage, European Union, presidency, Poland, news values, mixed method approach



INTRODUCTION

The large body of scholarly work on the news coverage of European Union (EU) affairs is devoted to an analysis of major European events, such as the introduction

of the euro, European Parliamentary elections and summits (de Vreese, 2001a, 2001b, 2001c; Wilke & Reinemann, 2007; Maier et al., 2011), or European referendum campaigns (de Vreese & Semetko, 2004a, 2004b; de Vreese & Boomgaarden, 2005). These studies generally focus on how news media cover the EU institutions in the individual member states. The findings show that the coverage of European affairs is cyclical, peaking during the events, but also that Europe as such is hardly visible before and after the news events. Furthermore, news organizations differ not only in terms of attention devoted to these events, but also in editorial policy and the degree of effort invested in covering the events.

Within the European context, a second strand of research on EU news reporting addresses the role of national and transnational media in a process of European integration (de Vreese & Semetko, 2004b; Boomgaarden et al., 2010), as well as in relation to (the emergence of) a European public sphere (Koopmans & Erbe, 2004; Wessler et al., 2008; Koopmans & Statham, 2010; Hepp et al., 2012). Here, one may distinguish a horizontal and vertical dimension of Europeanization. The former refers to an increasing monitoring of Europe and the EU in the public sphere of each country, while the latter points towards an increasing monitoring of and discussions with other EU countries (Offenhaus et al., 2014, p. 15).

However, with regard to the specific institution of the presidency of the EU Council, little scholarly attention is paid to the study of a single country's performance during the EU presidency. Most scholarship is focused either on short-duration events or long-term relations between the EU institutions (Trenz, 2004). Previous studies devoted to this particular topic are thus sparse and are exclusively national in their scope (Ekengren, 2004; van Dalen, 2014). They have shown that holding the presidency has traditionally been a good opportunity to bring the EU closer to home and put Europe on the national agenda (Norris, 2000; de Vreese, 2005). At the same time, the role of the EU presidency has changed considerably due to the implementation of the Nice and Lisbon Treaties. For example, meetings by the heads of state or governments are no longer part of the presidency and the so-called European Summits are not located in and chaired by the country holding the presidency. These changes have substantially affected the visibility of the EU in the presiding country (Boomgaarden et al., 2010; van Dalen, 2014). Nevertheless, holding the presidency still presents an opportunity to generate domestic and international media attention.

Furthermore, most of the studies on the coverage of the EU are generally focused on the EU as an intergovernmental institution (cf. vertical Europeanization), while still little is known about the particular flows of news in between EU member states (cf. horizontal Europeanization). Therefore, the aim of this article is to present the main findings of the international comparative project "Media coverage of the Polish EU presidency," which was designed as a case study of the examination of the international news coverage of Poland as the country holding the leading position in the EU Council in 2011. It was within a new institutional context following

the implementation of the Nice and Lisbon Treaties and heavily determined by the then ongoing Eurozone crisis. With its international design, the study contributes to the research on the European public sphere by providing insights on the horizontal dimension of Europeanization.

BACKGROUND

International news coverage presents a central platform for international communication processes, because international relations issues such as EU-related matters are essentially “second-hand reality” to most people. They form a rather abstract and distant level of relations that people do not have direct access to. Therefore, more than in other areas, international news coverage can significantly shape the knowledge that people have of other countries and cultures (Hargrove & Stempel, 2002; Wanta et al., 2004). Most of the scholarship in this field attempts to provide answers to two main questions: to what extent may media shape attitudes and opinions concerning foreign countries (framing, agenda setting and media effects), and which countries and events are actually selected and covered by foreign media (news value)?

Scholarly research on news selection criteria has a long tradition, from classic studies by Galtung and Ruge (1965), Gerbner and Marvanyi (1977) or Sreberny-Mohammadi (1984) to more recent work by Chang and Lee (1992), Wu (1998, 2000), Wilke and Heimprecht (2011), or Cohen (2013). The main conclusion drawn from these studies is that the amount of news coverage heavily depends on the proximity or (geographic) distance between countries and their cultural, political, or economic relations, both being aspects of the overarching news value of relevance. Accordingly, a lack of relevance is compensated by other news factors, resulting in a news agenda that is characterized by a limited range of topics, mainly including conflict, violence and hard news such as economics and politics (Joye, 2010).

Referring to the research object of the presented study, European countries are covered prominently within Europe, but the actual amount of news coverage largely depends on the roles played by the country within the region. Since newsworthy events may attract additional media attention, organizing or hosting international events is generally part of strategies of media management and public diplomacy (Signitzer & Coombs, 1992; Nye, 2004; Rivenburgh, 2010). Thus, during the six-month period of the EU presidency, the chairing government has a unique opportunity to attract foreign media attention, not only as a host of numerous meetings and events, but also as an actor-in-charge who can call for action and present solutions to the problems that the EU is facing at that time. In fact, all the government’s decisions, actions, or events may be perceived as particular signals sent to an international public in order to influence and enhance the state’s image as an important and effective EU member, as well as an attractive country for tourists, financial

investors and entrepreneurs. However, the country's domestic political situation and potential tensions or controversies may be a potential “chilling” or harming factor in this respect (Stępińska, 2013a, p. 71).

METHODOLOGY

Against this theoretical background, the project “Media coverage of the Polish EU presidency” provided an international framework to address the following two interrelated research questions. First, the study inquired whether the efforts to promote the image of Poland were successful i.e. did the Polish EU presidency term actually change the (news) *perception* of the country in other EU member states? Second, did other EU countries pay more attention to Poland during the country's holding of the position i.e. did the EU presidency enhance the *visibility* of Poland in the news coverage of other EU member states? Or can we identify other — internal and external — (political) events that attracted the attention of the news media? Furthermore, including a Polish news sample in the design allowed for a comparison of the news coverage in the country holding the EU position to the international (European) news coverage. This is relevant to trace possible universal patterns of reporting, levels of attention and frames of perception used by journalists and commentators.

These questions were tackled by an international team of scholars that investigated the news coverage of the Polish presidency in a selection of countries by applying a quantitative content analysis which was in most cases complemented by a qualitative content analysis as part of a mixed-method approach. Systematic selection of countries is unquestionably crucial for any comparative study. Since the project was interested in EU countries as the units of analysis, we strived to have a representative sample of the different regions in Europe (following Seawright & Gerring, 2008, pp. 300–301). The selection was not biased towards any particular region of the EU. Altogether, nine countries followed the official call for participation in the conjoint project — the international research team consisted of scholars from Austria (whose team also analysed the German media sample), Belgium, Estonia, Greece, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Spain and Sweden, which overall resulted in a rather diverse sample of country cases. It included countries with a long tradition of EU membership, as well as relatively new EU members. It also covered the spectrum of “heavyweight” EU players such as Germany, that are traditionally more visible in EU-level politics and discourse, as well as “lightweight” countries that are not as visible in the EU arena (Bulmer & Lequesne, 2013). However, we need to acknowledge that some of (what is often referred to as) the most Eurosceptic countries such as Great Britain or Denmark are missing in the sample, which may result in biased findings. Furthermore, we also included Poland in the sample, exclusively with respect to their coverage of the presidency, hence echoing the notion of “international” news.

For reasons of sound comparability, in this paper we present only results from those countries whose assigned research teams did follow the suggested codebook for the quantitative content analysis, as provided by the Polish project leader. These countries included: Austria, Belgium, Germany, Greece, Poland, and Romania (for more information about the overall project, as well as results of the additional country samples, see Stępińska, 2013a).

The empirical analysis focused on the Polish EU presidency that started on July 1, 2011 and ended on December 31, 2011. Data were gathered from June 15, 2011 till January 15, 2012 in three six week-periods: June 15–July 30, September 1–October 15, December 1–January 15. The choice of news media outlets covered the following criteria: (1) for each country at least one or two national daily newspapers, one popular/tabloid newspaper and one weekly magazine were included; (2) if resources allowed, country teams were invited to examine the online news media. News items (including comments, reports, editorials, etc.) that were published in the periods mentioned above were selected by using “Poland” as a keyword. Next, within collected items, a sub-category of the sample was created by using the “EU presidency” as a keyword. As a result, we got two kinds of stories. A first group related to Poland in general and a second one directly concerned the Polish presidency of the EU Council.

For the six country samples discussed in this paper, a quantitative content analysis was carried out by the country teams based on a commonly used codebook. The codebook included sixteen variables, such as date of publication, genres, position of the item, visual elements, source of information, dominant topic area, strategies of domestication, roles of Poland, or attitude towards Poland. Each team was in charge of collecting and training the coders.

For the additional qualitative content analysis of the perception of Poland in the different news content, most of the above mentioned teams used the same dataset as the one analyzed for the quantitative phase of the research project. While all country teams (except for Romania) conducted qualitative analyses, there was some diversity in the specific approaches taken, ranging from critical discourse analysis (Carvalho, 2008; Reisigl, 2008) to more conventional types of qualitative content analysis, being inductive (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) or deductive (Mayring, 2003). In the next section, the main results of the quantitative content analyses for each country will be shortly introduced from a comparative perspective to shed some light on the actual visibility of Poland during its presidency term. Subsequently, we will discuss the main results of the qualitative content analyses that focused on the perception and evaluation of Poland in its role as EU president.

FINDINGS FROM THE QUANTITATIVE CONTENT STUDIES

The quantitative content analysis of the news media focused on four questions:

1. Did the six-month period of the EU presidency draw more media attention to Poland in other EU member states?

2. How central was the news coverage of the Polish EU presidency compared to the overall news coverage on Poland throughout the time frame of the analysis?

3. What were the thematic dimensions in which Poland was observed in its national and international news coverage throughout its presidency term?

4. How strong was the domestic focus in the context of the news coverage of Poland in other EU member states?

To answer these questions, three variables of the codebook will be compared for the countries presented in this article and will form the basis for shedding more light on the question of visibility and relevance of Poland in the news coverage of other EU member states. In the following, general conclusions are taken from the six country samples. However, some limitations for the comparison of these data have to be pointed out. Since teams worked individually and were self-responsible for their data analysis, not all teams were able to cover the full spectrum of the timeframe and desired media outlets. For example, the Belgian sample consisted of only one quality newspaper, one popular newspaper and one weekly magazine, while in Greece as many as nine online news organizations and only two traditional printed newspapers were studied. In Romania, three online media organizations were included in the study, alongside four printed newspapers and magazines. In Austria, Belgium, Germany, and Poland online news content was not included in the sample. Thus, comparability of the country data on a quantitative level is not complete, although the participating countries gathered the same kind of news output in similar forms of media outlets, throughout the same time frame and using the same selection keywords. Results compared here are thus compared on the basis of an overall picture of the quantitative relevance of Poland (and the EU presidency) in the countries' news coverage in order to derive conclusions with regard to the overall visibility and relevance of Poland.

FOCUS ON POLAND DURING THE POLISH EU PRESIDENCY TERM

The results of the quantitative analyses (see Table 1) show that the Polish EU presidency term did not draw more attention to Poland in Austrian and German print news, despite Poland being the host of a number of EU events and meetings. Throughout the presidency term, the overall publication output did not change significantly and the news attention for Poland remained rather stable, and in the German case even dropped slightly. Also, the vast majority of those articles referring to Poland did not relate to the EU presidency. Also, a closer look at news articles focusing on the presidency revealed that Poland and the EU presidency were predominantly not the central focus. Often, the news item simply reported on events or actions carried out in the margin of this position. Thus, the relevance of Poland in both general and EU presidency-related articles was minor in the Austrian and German press.

Table 1. Frequency of the Polish EU presidency coverage

Country	Media organizations	Items about Poland (total number)	Items about The Polish EU Presidency (per cent)
Austria	<i>Der Standard</i> <i>Die Presse</i> <i>Kronenzeitung</i> <i>Profil</i>	795	7.2
Belgium	<i>De Morgen</i> <i>De Standaard</i> <i>HetLaatsteNieuws</i> <i>HetNieuwsblad</i> <i>Knack</i> <i>De Tijd</i>	735	1.6
Germany	<i>Süddeutsche Zeitung</i> <i>Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung</i> <i>Bild</i> <i>Der Spiegel</i>	1353	5.5
Greece	Online media: ert.gr skai.gr aixmi.gr madata.gr newsit.gr newsbomb.gr Online newspapers: tovima.gr avgi.gr eleftherotipia.gr Weekly magazines: KiriakatikiEleftherotipia To Vima	122	46.7
		56	23.6
Poland*	<i>Gazeta Wyborcza</i> <i>Rzeczpospolita</i> <i>Fakt</i> <i>Nasz Dziennik</i> <i>Polityka</i> <i>Wprost</i> <i>Uważam Rze</i>	767 (100)	
Romania	Printed newspapers: <i>Jurnalul National Adevarul</i> <i>Romania Libera</i> <i>Libertatea</i> <i>Revista 22</i> Online news media: Hotnews Ziare.com Euractiv	1668	15.7
		1047	36.2

* In case of the Polish sample all coded items were related to the Polish EU Presidency.

Source: authors.

The same goes for the Belgian news media, which also devoted little attention to the Polish presidency. The sparse coverage on this topic centered on the presidency coming into effect i.e. during the first three weeks of the Polish term. In the Greek news coverage, the content analysis also revealed a low visibility of the presidency. The six months of the Polish presidency did not appear much in the news coverage in Greece. The media only covered in more detail the official opening and the expiry of the Polish presidency. However, compared to the other country samples, the analysis of the Greek media did reveal that Poland in general was more frequently reported on and was thus quite visible in Greek news coverage. The Romanian case proved to be the exception in this regard. The general topic of Poland’s EU presidency attracted quite some attention of the Romanian newspapers and even more so of the online media.

In comparison, the findings for the Polish news media show that even in the home country the first Polish EU presidency was not very prominent on the news agenda. News media varied in presenting or introducing the topic on the front page, and journalists in some of the media organizations seemed to be more interested in the opinions of national politicians than foreign or national experts (Table 2). As a result, the framework of the coverage was predominantly domestic. The evaluation of Poland’s performance (or, in fact, the government’s performance) rather appeared to be another opportunity to report on domestic politics, and not to explain the EU policy to the readers.

Table 2. The Polish EU presidency on the Polish media

Media	Front page/front page and continue (per cent)	National politician as the author of opinion (per cent)	National expert as the author of opinion (per cent)	Journalist as the author of opinion (per cent)
<i>Gazeta Wyborcza</i>	18.1	20.4	12.6	43.7
<i>Rzeczpospolita</i>	46.3	16.5	21.4	42.7
<i>Nasz Dziennik</i>	17.5	24.0	29.3	30.7
<i>Fakt</i>	13.1	30.0	10.0	50.0
<i>Polityka</i>	2.6	0.0	6.7	83.3
<i>Wprost</i>	26.9	0.0	42.9	52.4
<i>Uważam Rze</i>	0.0	2.9	17.1	68.6

Source: authors.

THEMATIC FOCUS OF THE NEWS REPORTING ON POLAND

Secondly, in Austrian and German news media, the Polish EU presidency term did not change the overall thematic focus of the news coverage of Poland, indicating

that the overall frame of perception of Poland in the Austrian and German press remained unaltered. Altogether, a broad variety of thematic areas was covered; most frequently sports, followed by international politics, economic topics, and culture. Especially during the presidency term, economic topics became more frequent as a framework for the news coverage in Poland. The Polish EU presidency was not only discussed or referred to in the context of (national or international) politics, but also in the context of social relations, justice and crime, or economy in the Austrian media, and environment, economy, culture, or science and technology in the German media. However, in most contexts, Poland itself was only of minor relevance to the respective news items. Poland did not have a central role in the respective articles but was addressed as one of several countries, e.g. in reports on economic rankings of EU countries.

In the Belgian news, the most recurring topics in relation to Poland were sports, followed by justice and crime, and culture. If only looking at articles referring explicitly to the Polish EU presidency, Belgian news had a stronger focus on culture, meaning that even when news articles were related to “political” topics, they were not necessarily political in nature. In the Greek media reporting on Poland, relevant thematic areas concerned (international and domestic) politics — here also referring to the presidency — economy, accidents and disasters, sports, justice and crime, social relations, and culture. As in the German and Austrian samples, topics that made it to the Greek news agenda were the Polish national elections, the preparations for the European football championship in 2012 (hosted by Poland and Ukraine), as well as a train accident taking place in Poland during the presidency term. However, again a very small amount of the articles actually focused on the

Table 3. Main topics in the news items related to Poland (in per cent)

Country	International Politics	Economy	Culture	Sport	Internal politics	Human interests	Social relations	Justice and crime	Other
Austria	17.1	15.3	14.1	29.6	7.0	3.9	5.8	3.0	4.2
Belgium	2.9	10.9	12.4	38.8	1.5	5.4	4.2	15.5	8.4
Germany	14.4	13.8	19.1	27.1	8.1	3.9	4.8	3.7	5.1
Greece (newspapers)	0	70.2	0	0	22.8	0	0	5.3	1.8
Greece (online)	38.5	16.4	3.3	4.9	19.7	0.8	1.6	3.3	11.4
Romania (newspapers)	16.2	20.7	14.2	21	7.1	4.8	4.3	3.9	7.8
Romania (online)	16.2	25.9	10.7	12.4	12.2	3.4	5.7	3.7	9.8
Poland	34.8	15.8	16.7	0.3	21.8	2.2	2.6	1.4	4.4

Source: authors.

EU presidency in all Greek media outlets analyzed. This was not due to a general lack of interest in EU-related matters, but resulted from the focus on the European economic crisis that took place at the same time, and that which particularly hit Greece. Finally, also the Romanian news coverage had a very similar focus; here sports and the economy were the most significant thematic areas in both online media and printed press. These two topic areas were followed by international politics, cultural topics and Polish domestic affairs (Table 3).

If we compare this international news coverage of Poland with the domestic Polish news coverage, we see that the results are not so different. The theme of the EU presidency could be interpreted rather as an extended framework for the reporting on other “regular” news topics such as domestic politics, and not as an attempt to provide insights and details on EU policies.

DOMESTIC FOCUS IN THE NEWS COVERAGE OF POLAND

Thirdly, in Austria the analysis revealed a strong national self-reference in the articles on Poland. However, while the overall focus of the Austrian news coverage did have a significant domestic perspective, the focus on the EU presidency was mainly an “external” one, meaning foreign and thus distanced from Poland, and not creating a direct relevance to the own country or its issues. Domestic references in the overall German news coverage of Poland were even more frequent, while in the German articles that particularly referred to the Polish EU presidency, again domestic references were slightly less dominant. Also Belgian news media included a significantly high number of articles that had explicit references to Belgium’s national issues and actors, supporting the dynamics of domestication of international news (Gurevitch et al., 1991). In Romanian news media, the analysis of domesticated items shows differences between printed newspapers and online media in covering the issue investigated here. Strategies of domestication were used more frequently in Romanian newspapers than in the online media.

This journalistic practice of domesticating international news especially shaped the news reporting on Poland in the Greek news media. As stated above, this was mainly due to the fact that the Polish presidency coincided with the climax of the financial crisis in Greece. The analyzed Greek media especially focused on EU news that was directly connected to that subject e.g. with regard to its impact on the EU, the Eurozone, or Greece in particular. The Greek media was engaged in a perpetual effort to inform the Greek audience on all current developments that had a profound impact on the future of Greece in the EU. This may explain why the topic of the Polish EU presidency was pushed aside by more general EU-related issues and Greek national interests. It indicates that the Polish presidency did “inspire” journalists to discuss in more detail their views on the future of Europe and the role of the more powerful member states during the financial crisis, and the EU power constellations in general.

In the Polish news media, as one may expect, the framework of the news coverage on the Polish EU presidency was predominantly domestic, and foreign experts or actors were only rarely presented in the context of the topic.

FINDINGS FROM THE QUALITATIVE CONTENT STUDIES

In order to contextualize and deepen the findings from the quantitative study, this article further draws on insights from the qualitative analyses that were conducted by the different country teams. In the following section, the focus lies on the represented image of Poland and its presidency of the EU Council in the Austrian, Belgian, German, Greek, and Polish news media only, since Romania did not carry out a qualitative content analysis. Three main categories that emerged from the data are: 1) The overall visibility of Poland; 2) The assessment of the presidency; 3) The thematic focus of the articles.

Visibility of Poland

It is fair to state that all observed countries and their news media did not pay a lot of attention to the Polish presidency of the EU Council, neither in terms of quantitative measures nor when looking at the attributed visibility. This is to a large extent related to the specific political and economic (institutional) context in which Poland had to take up the presidency of the EU Council. At that time, the economic and financial crisis was at its peak and, understandably, reporting on the Eurozone crisis and the situation of Greece was in many countries considered as the undisputed headline and top priority of international news coverage. Likewise, the qualitative analyses confirmed that all (non-Polish) news media preferred to focus on other countries than Poland when covering the EU's handling of the crisis. The key players were the EU-heavyweights Germany, the UK, France and — given its central role in the crisis — Greece. Greek media in particular focused almost exclusively on the national situation with little to no reference to the Polish presidency.

For Polish news media, there was an obviously high proximity and hence a lot more attention was devoted to Polish politicians and experts as compared to foreign political actors. This differed from more remote countries such as Belgium and Greece where Polish actors were replaced by EU institutions or more newsworthy countries such as Germany, France, and the UK. German and Austrian news media took a middle position in this respect, following the stronger bi-national (economic and historical) relations between the different countries, alongside their geographic proximity. Here, the coverage of the presidency resulted in a slightly more complex perception of Poland, providing the audience with additional features about Poland in the context of EU presidency-related issues. Nevertheless, the data for Germany and Austria also support the overall observation that the Polish EU presidency was no major topic of interest to the news media.

In line with this limited visibility as chairing country of the EU, only little attention was paid to the goals, objectives and priorities that Poland announced at the beginning of its presidency, except in the Polish news outlets. The other news media only briefly mentioned the topics that were introduced regarding defense and an opening up towards the East at the start of the presidency in July. Also, these issues failed to attract much follow-up news or if so, the Polish role as the Council's chairing country mostly was not a central focus.

Assessment of the Polish presidency

Besides the lack of visibility, in general, all qualitative content analyses revealed a predominantly neutral assessment of Poland and the presidency, hence implicitly underwriting the news media's neutral and objective coverage. Nonetheless, we did find differences according to the topics covered and the editorial policy of the selected news media. For instance, more partisan media with an overtly Euro-sceptic opinion had a negative bias towards Poland, and by extension the EU. Given the interconnected national and supranational European level, this was very evident for the Polish media, as national news media's anti-governmental sentiments also reflected in their critical international reporting on the Polish presidency and other European political actors. On the other hand, domestic news media that assume a pro-government stance displayed an openly more positive evaluation of the presidency and simultaneously portrayed it as a significant and important position or task. Political sympathies on the national level thus discursively informed the (positive, neutral or negative) assessment of the EU, the cabinet that held the EU presidency and its actions, resulting in a politically biased international coverage. Likewise, the presidency was also used by the Polish partisan press as a discursive platform to tackle domestic issues, national(ist) interests and power relations.

With regard to the topics covered, news items on the political activities and initiatives of Poland identified a clear bias towards the more sensational and negative. Despite the political significance of chairing the Council and the opportunities that it provides for a country to present itself as a competent and reliable political actor, the findings from the qualitative content analyses do not seem to fully support this line of thought. Belgian press, for instance, paid substantial attention to a number of incidents that occurred during Poland's presidency, hence not sketching a very positive image. Reflecting the overall neutral assessment, the Belgian news items did, however, also articulate a significant alternative discourse that reduced the impact of the political incidents on the country's image by repeatedly stressing the chairing country's inexperience as a valid explanation and simultaneously eliciting a sense of empathy or forgiveness. In addition, the Belgian press was very positive about the rich cultural history and assets of contemporary Poland, which also attributed to the overall neutral to even slightly positive evaluation.

The Austrian and German press started out with a rather positive evaluation of Poland as an ambitious and self-confident president. But as the presidency term progressed, more critical voices were cited and more attention was devoted to failed goals, eventually resulting in a more qualified representation that acknowledged the rather powerless position of Poland within the EU constellation. With regard to other topics such as the economy or Poland's domestic political situation, the Austrian and German news coverage was more positive.

Last but not least, another indicator of a country's assessment by externals is the amount of stereotypes and clichés that are being used in news reports. These tell us a lot about the general image that is assigned to a country and the degree of interest and attributed importance. If news reports do not take the effort to go beyond the shallow representations and established stereotypes, this can be seen as an indication of the country's low appreciation and relevance. The study did point out that well-known stereotypes about Poland or its national peculiarities were quite prominent in Austrian, Belgian, German and Greek news media, but these were regularly contextualized and embedded in broader discussions on the country's identity. So, prevailing stereotypes were mainly used as a narrative device to explore a more complex image of Poland and Polish people, again supporting the claim that the overall assessment of Poland was very neutral. Drawing on examples from different country samples, the following stereotypes about Polish people — as perceived and reconstructed by the journalists — featured the most in the news media: a cheap labor force (cleaning ladies, construction workers etc.), conservative, very religious and vodka-minded people. Other discursive frames that were presented in the news reports deal with Poland's status as a former communist country and its often conflictual history in relation to neighboring countries like Germany. Regarding the former, attention was devoted to the "grey" communist period, the *Solidarność* movement and the subsequent transition to democracy and free market, leading to a new norm of commercialism and "bourgeoisie." Greek media were reportedly more negative on the communist past of Poland. In German and Austrian news media, a dominant narrative concerned the historical and often problematic bi-national relations between the different countries. Additionally, Poland was sometimes articulated as a nostalgic country that is characterized by a deep duality as manifested by its glorious yet also troubled history.

Thematic focus

As discussed above, the findings from the qualitative content analyses show that Poland did not fully succeed in positioning itself as a major political actor within the European context. It was not unanimously positively assessed or portrayed in a position to define the major directions of the EU policy, despite taking up the presidency of the Council. Accordingly, although one could expect that (EU) political themes and issues would be the dominant narrative in the news coverage of

the EU presidency, this was not always the case. Many news reports focused on non-political topics such as culture, tourism, sports and economics. This is another indication of the limited political weight that Poland was assigned.

In Belgian news media, Poland was represented as being very successful in promoting and improving its cultural and touristic image and the representation of Poland's presidency was largely "depoliticized" by the news media. Instead, it was represented as a key opportunity to showcase the rich cultural history and assets of contemporary Poland to the rest of Europe. The qualitative content analysis exposed a dominant cultural frame in the Belgian news reporting on the Polish presidency. News media in Austria and Germany emphasized other topics such as the internal political situation of Poland (e.g. national elections), its environmental policy and the country's economic situation. Greek media focused more on Poland as a host of (international) cultural and sports events.

Thus, the six-month period of the presidency did not lead to a significant increase in the complexity of the news coverage of Poland, but the news coverage was neither one-dimensional. Nevertheless, with regard to the specific role of holding the office of the EU presidency, Poland did not successfully manage to shape itself as more than just the host of EU meetings or the organizer of events. Other political roles or topics that were particularly relevant to or shaped by the Polish presidency were not identified in the different country samples. Referring to the news agenda, the findings suggest that Poland's presidency did not ultimately change the thematic focus of the news coverage of Poland in the other EU member states.

CONCLUSIONS

The results of the international comparative analysis suggest the following answers to the two research questions that formed the framework for the project. First of all, the analyzed EU member states did not reveal a significant increase in the attention paid to Poland during the country's EU presidency term. Most importantly, all countries analyzed in the comparative project pointed out that the topic of the presidency was only of minor relevance in the overall news coverage of Poland. Thus firstly, the presidency did not enhance the visibility of Poland in the news coverage in the respective EU member states. Secondly, the Polish presidency term did not influence the news media's perception of Poland in the respective EU countries.

Nevertheless, the study also provides us with some explanations here: For instance, the dominant patterns of the international as well as domestic news coverage (of Poland) appear to be unaffected by EU-related events. They are rather shaped by predictors of newsworthiness such as relevance or deviance. The findings thus suggest that holding the EU presidency does not guarantee a high level of media interest. In this respect, we need to acknowledge the cyclical nature of international news as scholars generally conceive it to be a "zero-sum game" (Franks, 2004). Peaks and troughs in the amount of international news can be explained by the occurrence of

either major domestic (e.g. national elections) or newsworthy international events (e.g. worldwide economic crisis) (Joye, 2010). Therefore, the lack of attention shown to the Polish presidency does not necessarily stem from a failure in the political performance (and marketing) of Poland, but may also result from routine journalistic practices of news selection and coverage. Related to this, Poland took up the presidency position in times of turmoil, with the European financial crisis (since 2009) having significantly increased the skepticism towards the EU's policies — not only in traditionally EU-skeptical members like Austria. The findings of all country analyses (including the Polish one) pointed out that the Eurozone crisis pushed Poland as the presidency holder out of the limelight. All of the analyzed countries' news media did focus on EU-related topics, but they focused more strongly on crucial heavyweight EU players (Germany, France), or on countries that were most severely affected by the crisis (Greece, Spain), not on Poland as EU's presidency holder.

Further research therefore needs to compare EU presidency terms of different member states, their visibility and their perceived performances on an EU scale, especially in order to scrutinize the relation between the image of a country and the contextual (domestic and international) events that occur throughout a country's presidency term. Here, it might be interesting to see whether EU countries do pay more and different attention to the presidency when the latter is held by a heavyweight player.

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