

CHAPTER 12

Presidents, Institutions, and the Quest for Coherent Leadership

TAPIO RAUNIO

Takeaways for Leading Change

Comparing three semi-presidential regimes, the main argument of this chapter is that institutional design has a strong independent effect on leadership. Drawing on official documents and interview data with top-level civil servants and politicians, it underlines the importance of coordination mechanisms between the president and the prime minister. Such institutional arrangements facilitate effective policy-making and mitigate tensions between the two executives. Reflecting its more stable and regulated political system, Finland stands out with its strongly institutionalised coordination mechanisms and low level of intra-executive conflict. In Lithuania and Romania, on the other hand, each new president brings her own staff, personality and leadership style to the equation, with Romanian politics in particular characterised by high levels of tension between the president and the prime minister. The Lithuanian and Romanian cases indicate that absent of written rules or otherwise strong norms guiding intra-executive coordination, presidents enjoy more discretion in designing their own modes of operation. Under such circumstances presidents are more likely to use alternative channels of influence, such as public criticism of the cabinet or direct contacts with political parties, the legislature, or civil society stakeholders, and to intervene in questions falling under the competence of the government. This undermines coherent leadership and can even have serious consequences for regime stability, not least in the personality-centred politics commonly found in Central and East European countries and other more fragile democracies.

Semi-presidentialism denotes a political system where a directly-selected president shares executive power with a prime minister (PM). Importantly, semi-presidentialism, which is the most common regime type in Europe, seems more prone to conflicts than parliamentarism or presidentialism. To be more specific, it is unique in the sense that conflicts can arise within the executive branch, between the president and the PM and the government. Such conflicts can be particularly damaging in terms of coherent leadership and policy-making. Largely influenced by Shugart and Carey (1992), studies have established that conflict between the two

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executives is to be expected under two types of semi-presidentialism – in premier-presidential regimes (where the cabinet can only be dismissed by the parliament) and president-parliamentary regimes (where both the president and the parliament have the formal power to dismiss the cabinet). Intra-executive conflict is associated with negative outcomes such as cabinet instability (Sedelius & Ekman, 2010) and disruptive policy-making (Lazardeux, 2015). Research has furthermore established that conflict is more likely under cohabitation, defined as a situation where the president and the PM represent different political parties or ideological blocs (Protsyk, 2005; 2006; Sedelius & Mashtaler, 2013; Elgie, 2018).

A largely neglected variable in the comparative literature on intra-executive conflict, however, is the institutional instruments for coordinating policy and executive leadership between the president and the cabinet. In fact, we know very little about the extent to which coordination mechanisms between the two executives vary among semi-presidential countries, and more importantly, how such variation may influence the balance of power between the two chief executives. This chapter argues that coordination mechanisms between the president and the prime minister are of crucial importance in explaining presidential activism and intra-executive conflict. To be clear, it is not expected that such coordination

mechanisms are necessarily more important than key institutional variables such as presidential powers, cohabitation, or electoral and party system dynamics. But this chapter argues that typical intra-executive conflicts over policy, legislation and appointments may in fact be manifestations of coordination problems. Successful leadership in semi-presidential regimes requires regular dialogue between the president and the PM, particularly in policy areas where they share power. Apart from facilitating beneficial outcomes, effective coordination mechanisms reduce uncertainty so that the individuals are aware of and can anticipate each other's preferences and behaviour. In line with institutional theory, institutions can thus make a difference in that they induce actors otherwise driven by self-interest towards a "problem-solving" mode characterised by cooperation and search for mutually beneficial solutions (e.g., Scharpf, 1989; North, 1990). And in line with the "logic of appropriateness" (March & Olsen, 1989; 2006), stable and repeated coordination should also over time strengthen the socialisation effects of institutions whereby both executives, their offices, and other stakeholders become accustomed to certain "ways of doing things" and perceive regular coordination as the appropriate course of action.

Examining semi-presidentialism and intra-executive coordination is thus ultimately research about leadership. Students of political leadership normally emphasise that the leaders of political regimes should provide clear and sufficiently dynamic leadership, especially during more turbulent times. Communication plays an important role in modern leadership, with leaders expected to justify their positions and inform the electorate through a variety of channels (Helms, 2012; Rhodes & 't Hart, 2014; Elgie, 2018). Hence the chapter contributes to this edited volume through examining *political* leadership as exercised by presidents in three European countries. The comparative dimension enables us to draw lessons about both the causes and consequences of presidential behaviour and which institutional mechanisms facilitate stable leadership.

The selected cases are three premier-presidential countries: Finland, Lithuania and Romania. While the three countries have rather similar constitutional designs, they at the same time represent variation regarding presidential powers, level of intra-executive conflict, and political context. Finland is a long established democracy with a highly institutionalised

political system, where a recent constitutional reform resulted in a significant weakening of its historically strong presidency. Lithuania, on the contrary, is a young democracy with a largely personalised political culture but has generally functioned with few instances of severe intra-executive conflict. Romania, finally, has faced more severe transitional difficulties and has struggled with disruptive policy-making, widespread corruption and several instances of intense conflict between the president and the government. The constitutional powers of the president are somewhat stronger in Lithuania and Romania than in Finland.

Asking “do institutions matter”, this study will dig deeper into institutional design at the level of practices, routines and coordination instruments between the executives, that is, at a level where comparative research is currently lacking on systematic and empirical knowledge. By utilising interview data with key civil servants and politicians, and official documents, it is able to reach “behind the scenes” to explore the importance of coordination mechanisms and how they are associated with presidential activism and intra-executive conflict. The next part sets the theoretical framework by addressing the incentives and disincentives for conflict and cooperation between the president and the PM and by identifying coordination instruments relevant to the interaction between the two executives. The subsequent section presents case selection and data. The empirical analysis is structured around the presence or absence of coordination mechanisms identified in the theoretical section. The concluding discussion summarises and discusses briefly the implications of the findings.

Theoretical Framework: (Dis)incentives for Cooperation and Coordination Mechanisms

Semi-presidential regimes encompass vast differences on the precise relationship between the cabinet and the president, also within the category of premier-presidential countries. There are countries where the president is merely a ceremonial head of state and the PM controls the policy-making process. Finland’s 2000 constitution, for example, provides the president

with formal prerogatives, particularly through co-leadership of foreign policy, that are just above those of a ceremonial figurehead. A potential risk with this model, however, is that a weak and marginalised, yet directly-elected, president can seek to compensate his or her limited powers with obtrusive behaviour, especially if the president's popularity outweighs his or her formal powers. The literature on semi-presidentialism is full of examples of such behaviour. When the government is clearly dominant, also the PM can feel no need for coordination beyond perhaps the president's office receiving information about governmental decisions and policies.

In general, the president and the PM should thus have stronger incentives to seek cooperation where there is a more balanced distribution of power between the government and the president and if the two executives share powers in particular policy areas. Under such power-sharing there are simply more issues subject to joint decision-making and thus also to intra-executive coordination. To be sure, there are also more possibilities for disagreement and conflict, which raise the need for regular and well-defined coordination in order to facilitate successful policy-making. The latter applies especially to foreign and security policies, including European Union (EU) affairs, issue areas where it is often emphasised that disunity at home should not undermine success abroad.

Regardless of the exact powers of presidents, presidential activism tends to be higher when the country is experiencing political turbulence, with low level of societal consensus or weak governments (e.g., Tavits, 2009). These considerations are particularly relevant for the younger democracies such as in Central and Eastern Europe, where surveys show high levels of public trust in the presidents but outright distrust in other political actors such as the PM and the parties. The presidents' greater popularity may be attributed to their limited powers. They have projected themselves to be above party politics, being somewhat elevated from the usual political quarrels. Prime ministers, on the contrary, experience the dilemma of exercising their power in areas of controversy, such as social and economic policies, thereby further eroding their popular support. Hence, presidents are normally constitutionally assigned to stand above party politics. The paradox, however, is that presidents may feel that their popularity does not translate into political influence. When seeking ways of converting their perceived

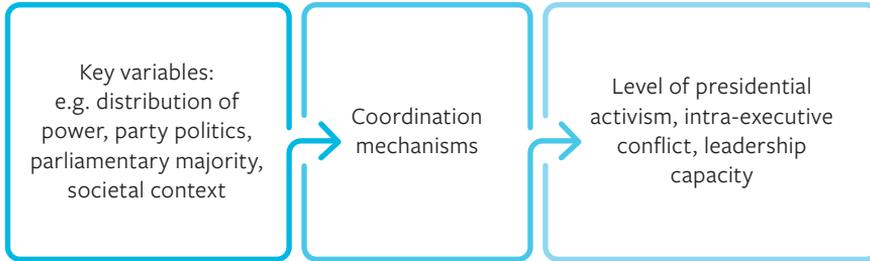


FIGURE 1. Coordination mechanisms and intra-executive conflict

prestige into actual power, they can publicly criticise the government by leaning on the popular mandate. Weak presidents thus seek to compensate their limited constitutional powers with more indirect channels of influence or obtrusive behaviour. And, as stated in the introductory section, tensions between the two executives are more likely under cohabitation.

Having discussed briefly the (dis)incentives for coordination between the president and the PM and the contextual factors influencing intra-executive cooperation, Figure 1 summarises the basic theoretical argument. It understands cooperation mechanisms as intervening variables positioned between key explanatory factors derived from previous literature on semi-presidentialism (the distribution of power between the president and the cabinet, the role of party politics, and the societal context) and the outcome – which is the level of presidential activism that influences intra-executive conflict and thereby also leadership capacity or performance. The more regular and institutionalised the coordination mechanisms are, the stronger their effect should be.

It is argued here that coordination mechanisms can make a genuine difference: individual office-holders are constrained by them, especially when the mechanisms have become more entrenched and recognised as legitimate by the actors involved. In contrast, when coordination instruments do not exist or are weak, then both executives have more freedom of manoeuvre. Absent of a working constitutional division of labor and regular coordination, particularly the presidents are more likely to use alternative channels of influence – such as the strategy of “going public” or direct contacts with political parties, the legislature, or civil society

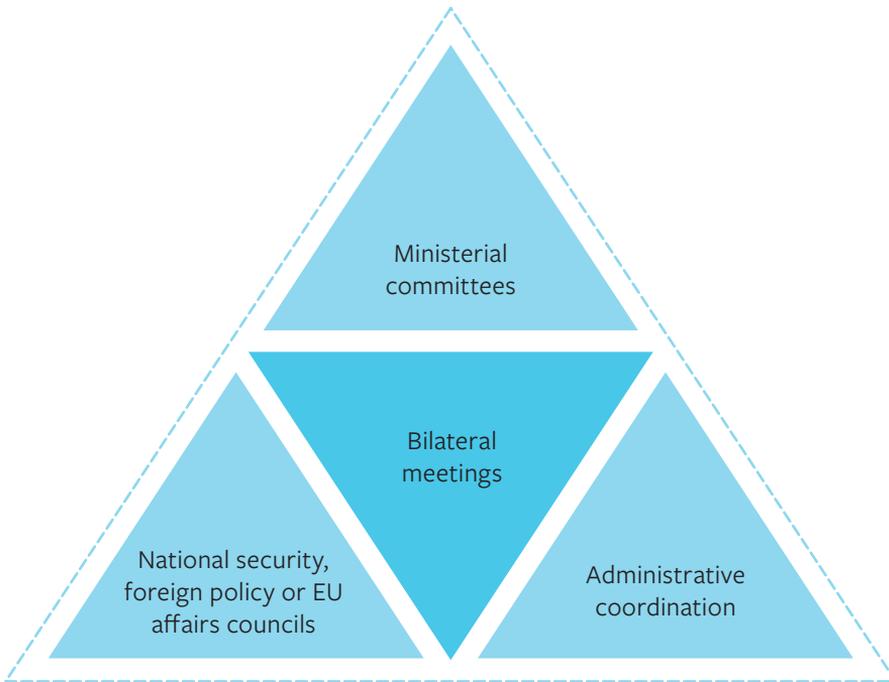


FIGURE 2. Coordination mechanisms between the president and the cabinet

stakeholders – and to intervene in questions falling under the competence of the government. Furthermore, ad hoc practices are likely to favour the side that, either because of constitutional division of power or through contextual factors, enjoys agenda-setting powers and can thus choose or at least strongly influence the levels and forms of coordination.

But how to define coordination mechanisms? Three levels of coordination are identified – bilateral (between the president the PM), collective (between the president and the government), and administrative (between the offices of the president and the prime minister and the ministries) – whilst also differentiating among policy areas. The coordination instruments are introduced one-by-one, identifying also their predicted roles in intra-executive coordination (Figure 2).

Bilateral meetings between the president and prime minister. Particular importance is assigned to confidential exchanges between the two leaders that form the core of intra-executive coordination – hence this category of

coordination mechanisms is placed at the centre of the pyramid in Figure 2. Regular talks between the president and the PM enable them to learn about each other's preferences, negotiation styles, and personalities. Such face-to-face contacts should ideally take place before the president meets the whole government or before either side meets foreign leaders or attends international or EU meetings. In this way, potentially sensitive issues can be discussed in private and even if no compromise is found, both leaders can agree on how to proceed with these matters. However, it is unlikely that laws would regulate such bilateral meetings. Hence, they can also be particularly vulnerable to break down after the election of new office-holders.

Ministerial committees or joint councils between the president and the government. As the literature on coalition governments shows, ministerial committees perform an important function in both cabinet decision-making and as a conflict-resolution mechanism (Müller & Strøm, 2000; Strøm, Müller, & Bergman, 2008). These ministerial committees usually bring together a sub-set of ministers from all coalition parties and they deal with specific issue areas such as economic policy or European policy. The powers and composition of the ministerial committees are typically regulated by laws or even by constitutions, with more detailed rules found in the government's rules of procedure. In policy areas where the president shares power with the government, mainly in foreign and security policy, such ministerial committees would enable both sides to keep track of developments and to exchange ideas before the formal decision-making stage. Various joint councils would on average have a more informal status and bring together the president and ministers to discuss specific societal issues such as education or economy. They could also take the form of periodic meetings between the whole government and the president that would focus perhaps mainly on topical issues.

National security, foreign policy, or EU affairs councils. External relations were identified as a policy area where directly-elected presidents not only have constitutional powers but where countries are expected to act with one voice. This applies particularly to security and defense policies, issue areas that are highly salient and where domestic consensus is appreciated (e.g. Raunio & Wagner, 2017). National security councils or equivalents often have a central role in defining and planning the countries' security and military

strategies. They can simultaneously facilitate intra-executive coordination, but who chairs such bodies can be a delicate question. Naturally, ministerial committees can also be established to examine foreign and security policy and indeed European matters. EU affairs pose particular challenges for coordination, especially as the development of the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) means that national foreign and security policies – areas where presidents enjoy constitutional powers – are increasingly linked to European level policy processes (Raunio, 2012). Hence, whether the president is involved in or excluded from the national EU coordination system can have broader implications for leadership in foreign affairs.

Coordination between civil servants of the offices of the prime minister and the president. Moving to the administrative level, the interaction between the respective offices of the president and the PM can play an important role, especially regarding information exchange. Comparative literature suggests that the role of top-level administrative elites has become more important over the decades. Political leaders have typically two categories of staff working for them: civil servants that work for the state and political staff that come and go with individual office-holders. The staff at the prime minister's office oversees and coordinates activities in the ministries and perhaps also public sector agencies while handling central governmental communication. Particularly the political staff provides policy advice to the PM or the president, including in foreign and security policy, and can be key players in solving disputes between different branches of government (e.g. Mitchell, 2005; Eichbaum & Shaw, 2014; Yong & Hazell, 2014; Gherghina & Kopecký, 2016; Marland, Lewis, & Flanagan, 2017).

Regular coordination and exchange of information between the staffs of the prime minister and the president should facilitate successful cooperation between the two executives. However, the size and responsibilities of the president's staff can also be important variables. The budget of the president's office is normally determined by the annual national budget, and in semi-presidential countries, the total number of staff working for the president tends to be quite small. Presidents can compensate this with recruiting personnel that focus on specific policy areas, including those falling in the competence of the government. For example, a policy adviser in economy can provide crucial information to the president and can

form contacts with the relevant ministry and parliamentary committee. Furthermore, small but effective communication staff can be of substantial help in spreading the word about president's views and activities.

As theorised above, the existence of such coordination mechanisms should correlate with the level of presidential activism – both through public speeches (“going public”) or direct contacts with political parties, the legislature, or civil society stakeholders. That is, the less the president meets the PM or the government, the more there is space and need for direct contacts with other members of the cabinet, the parliament and its party groups, or the leaders of political parties, with the president building these contacts to “stay in the loop” of governmental activities and to influence decision-making in the cabinet or the legislature. This should also increase the probability of the president seeking to influence policy areas falling under the jurisdiction of the government, including through direct appeals to the public.

Case Selection and Data

The three cases represent both variation and similarities. As explained in the introductory section, they represent different semi-presidential experiences: a stable political system and the considerable weakening of a historically strong presidency in Finland from the 1990s onwards; general intra-executive stability under a personalised political system in Lithuania; and strong presidential influence, personalised politics, and high institutional tensions in Romania.¹ The constitutional prerogatives of the president are stronger in Lithuania and Romania than in Finland, but in all three countries in foreign and security policy as well as in EU affairs the powers of the respective presidents are broadly similar, with foreign policy leadership shared between the president and the government. Lithuania

1 Typically such conflicts have revolved around government formation, appointments, and clashes over government performance. For a closer inspection of intra-executive conflicts in the three countries, see Gallagher and Andrievici (2008), Krupavičius (2008; 2013); Raunio (2012), Gherghina (2013), and Elgie (2018).

and Romania also have the shared legacy of systemic communism, the subsequent transition to democracy and market economy in the 1990s, and the EU and NATO accession processes in the 2000s. Overall, intra-executive relations in Finland have been essentially harmonious whereas Lithuania and particularly Romania have witnessed serious conflicts between the PM and the president.

The analysis covers the period from the early 1990s to 2017. Data consists of official documents, secondary material such as politicians' memoirs and research literature, and particularly interview data with top-level civil servants and politicians with first-hand knowledge on president-cabinet relations. Having charted the existence of coordination mechanisms, the key objective of the interviews was to establish the actual role and importance of these institutions. The topic is obviously quite sensitive and the interviewees were willing to speak only under the condition of anonymity. A total of 10 persons were interviewed in Finland, 9 in Lithuania, and 11 in Romania. Many of them had experience of intra-executive coordination under two or more presidents. The positions of the interviewees include current and former high-level civil servants, counsellors and advisors in the offices of the president and the PM, speakers and members of parliaments, and ministers including one former prime minister.²

Coordination Between the President and the Government

The comparison of coordination mechanisms reveals significant differences between the three countries (Table 1). Turning first to bilateral, confidential exchanges between the two leaders, in Finland the system has remained the same ever since the new constitution entered into force in 2000. The

2 For reasons of space the official documents or the interviewed persons are not listed. The official documents mainly consisted of the respective constitutions and relevant laws, as well as governments' rules of procedure and other documents about intra-executive coordination. The full list of research material is available from the author.

president meets the PM essentially on a weekly basis, on Fridays before the plenary of the government and a potential meeting of the Ministerial Committee on Foreign and Security Policy. These bilateral meetings are very short, lasting normally at most half an hour. While not based any law or decree, the meetings have become an established practice not dependent on individual office-holders. In Lithuania and Romania, on the other hand, much depends on the party-political context and the presidents that have the initiative regarding such meetings. In Lithuania the presidents have by and large met prime ministers regularly, but presidents have also opted not to have such bilateral talks. For example, current President Dalia Grybauskaitė has met the PM almost weekly, but for six months in 2016 there were no regular meetings with the PM. Also during the presidencies of Algirdas Brazauskas and Valdas Adamkus the regularity of meetings varied. In Romania there is no such institutionalised practice: instead, there are meetings or phone calls on various topics when the need arises, with such interaction smoother and more active when the president and the PM share the same political affiliation (for example Nicolae Văcăroiu and Ion Iliescu, Victor Ciorbea and Emil Constantinescu, and Emil Boc and Traian Băsescu).

In Finland the president meets also the foreign minister on a weekly basis, but not other ministers with the exception of those government plenaries chaired by the president. This is logical given that the president has no competence in domestic policy. In Lithuania each president and particularly their staff have in turn been in active contact with the cabinet ministers and their ministries. The size of the president's office may be small, but, interestingly, the staff of each Lithuanian president has comprised mainly policy advisers in areas falling under the competence of the government – including social policy, economic policy, education, culture, religion etc. With the help of these advisors, successive presidents have actively formed ties with not just individual ministers and ministries but also with political parties, the speakers, party groups and individual deputies of Seimas and civil society stakeholders. Such behaviour is driven by policy-seeking logic, as the Lithuanian president can in the end achieve very little alone. Largely the same applies to Romania, where each president has utilised various channels to influence government decision-making, from ties to political parties and civil society stakeholders to addressing the legislature. The size

	YES/NO			LEGAL STATUS			CHANGE OVER TIME / REMARKS		
	FIN	LIT	ROM	FIN	LIT	ROM	FIN	LIT	ROM
Bilateral meetings, president-PM	Yes	Yes	Yes, in relation to sensitive issues	No	No	No	Stable	Usually regular, dependent on office-holders	Dependent on office-holders
Bilateral meetings, president-cabinet ministers	Yes	Yes	Yes, in relation to sensitive issues	No	No	No	Stable, with the president meeting the foreign minister almost every week	Variation, depending on office-holders	
Joint councils or similar, president-government	No	No	No	No	No	No		Some existed during Brazauskas and Adamkus	No
Ministerial committees where president is represented	Yes	No	No	Yes	No	No	Stable	No	No
National security councils or equivalent where president and government are represented	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes, defined by constitution and law		The ministerial committee on foreign and security policy can be considered to perform this role	No	No
Coordination between civil servants of the president and the PM	Yes	Yes	Yes, limited and usually for formal/technical and specific issues	No	No	No	Regular exchange of information	"Business relations" type	No
Coordination between president and political parties/ ruling coalition	No	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes, defined by constitution	No	Varies depending on parliamentary majority and the party-political situation	

TABLE 1. Intra-executive coordination mechanisms in Finland, Lithuania and Romania

of the president's office is considerably larger than in Finland or Lithuania, and the advisors to the president cover essentially all policy sectors, including economic policy. It appears that in Romania the links between the president and his political party remain much stronger during the presidency than in Finland or Lithuania (Gherghina, Iancu, & Soare, 2016). An interesting feature is presidential speeches in the parliament. They have become more numerous over time and can be considered as an agenda-

setting device, with the president presenting his vision about the most important societal questions. Such vision is more likely to be implemented if the president has a friendly majority in the legislature, whereas under cohabitation the president criticizes governmental decisions and tries to promote his own views on how Romania should be governed.³

None of the countries employ more permanent joint councils that would bring together the president and members of the government. Finland is the only country utilising ministerial committees, with the president chairing the Ministerial Committee on Foreign and Security Policy. Meeting regularly, the ministerial committee performs an important function in the co-leadership of foreign and security policy between the president and the cabinet. The Finnish ministerial committee can also in a sense be perceived as a national security council, although without the presence of representatives of armed forces. In Lithuania the functions and competence of the State Defence Council are defined in the constitution and the Special Law on State Defence Council, and presidents Brazauskas and Adamkus made use of some joint councils. In Romania the president can chair those sessions of the full government where national security issues are on the agenda, but presidents have used this prerogative to a varying extent. As in Lithuania, there is a specific Supreme Council of National Defence (CSAT) that brings together the president and the PM. Finally, in all countries there is active coordination between the offices of the president and the prime minister, although such communication between civil servants appears least institutionalised in Romania.

The variation clearly correlates with both the level of presidential activism as well as with the intensity of intra-level conflict. It was hypothesised that absent of a working constitutional division of labour and established coordination, presidents are more likely to use alternative channels of influence – especially the strategy of “going public” or direct contacts with other political actors – and to intervene in questions falling under the

3 The Romanian constitution (article 80.2.) stipulates that the president “mediates between the different branches of state power” as well as “between state and society.” On both cases of impeachment against President Bănescu in 2007 and 2012, it was argued that instead of “mediating” the president had too strongly influenced the work of the other state institutions.

competence of the government. Again the differences between the cases are significant. In Finland, the presidents have essentially never publicly criticised the government, not even during divided government. For example, when the social democratic President Tarja Halonen shared power with centre-right prime ministers from 2003 to 2012, she often emphasised different topics in her speeches, but even in case of open clashes, such as over appointments or representation in the European Council (see below), she refrained from publicly attacking the government. In Lithuania and Romania, on the other hand, presidents have not hesitated to “go public.” Lithuanian presidents have publicly questioned the legitimacy of governments, with President Adamkus even using two high-profile television speeches to force prime ministers Gediminas Vagnorius and Brazauskas to resign. In Romania, apart from addressing the legislature, presidents have directly attacked the prime ministers and criticised the governments and other state organs. In line with previous research on semi-presidentialism, such public criticism of the PM in Lithuania and Romania is considerably more pronounced during periods of cohabitation.

Presidents are also more likely to resort to direct contacts with political parties, the state administration, and civil society actors when they do not have friendly majorities in the parliament. Moreover, in all three countries, although definitely least in Finland, presidents have in their speeches underlined their position as leaders of the countries, distancing themselves from party politics and the political class (see also Gallagher & Andrievici, 2008; Krupavičius, 2008, 2013; Gherghina, 2013; Raunio & Sedelius, 2017).

Lack of rules in turn explains presidential “power grabs” in EU affairs. In all three countries the government and specifically the PM is in charge of national European policy, with the competence of the respective presidents basically restricted to foreign and security policy – and thereby at least indirectly to CFSP. Following Lisbon Treaty (2009) each country is represented in the European Council either by the prime minister or the president, and in Finland, despite objections from Halonen, who had

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participated in the majority of the European Council meetings together with the PM, it was decided by the government that the PM would be representing Finland. According to a constitutional amendment from 2012 “The Prime Minister represents Finland on the European Council. Unless the Government exceptionally decides otherwise, the Prime Minister also represents Finland in other activities of the European Union requiring the participation of the highest level of State” (for more discussion, see Raunio, 2012).

In Lithuania, the constitution, secondary laws, or the rules about domestic EU coordination do not detail who should represent the country in the European Council. President Adamkus participated in those European Councils which featured foreign and security policy while the PM covered other matters. Often both executives would attend the summits. Grybauskaitė in turn participates in the European Council, even though constitutional provisions about division of labor clearly suggest that the PM should represent Lithuania. Overall, her influence appears quite strong in EU and economic affairs, partly because Grybauskaitė had served previously as the finance minister and as the Commissioner for Financial Programming and the Budget. According to one interview the prime ministers did not contest this arrangement: “The leader which enjoys public support can easily do such things ad hoc, therefore it was possible to establish certain practices without any legal documents – just like with attendance of the meetings of the European Council.” The lack of contestation was aided by the weakness of the government as PM Andrius Kubilius needed presidential support for the austerity measures (Raunio & Sedelius, 2017). In Romania it is also the president that attends the summits of the European Council, with the PM only travelling to the meetings upon delegation by the president. Following a major conflict between PM Victor Ponta and President Băsescu in 2012, the Constitutional Court confirmed that the president represents Romania in the European Council.

Overall, ad hoc practices facilitate presidential influence. Lithuanian and Romanian presidents also have the power of initiative regarding cooperation, with forms and levels of intra-executive coordination essentially always determined by the president. For example, while joint councils or ministerial committees might facilitate better coordination,

presidents do not need such bodies. As one interviewee from Lithuania put it: “Presidents that have enough powers do not create such councils, they do not need such kind of institutions, they just arrange ad hoc meetings despite the fact that it is not foreseen in any law.” Coordination is clearly most institutionalised in foreign and security policy, including between foreign ministries and the president’s office. Lithuania and Romania utilise specific national security councils whereas Finland has a ministerial committee on security policy. Such bodies facilitate confidential exchange of information between the two executives, and the interviews in general confirm that even when the president and the PM disagree about domestic matters, particular attention is paid to ensuring that the countries speak with one voice in international negotiations.⁴

The results also provide evidence of considerable stability as initially adopted practices have become the standard or appropriate course of action. Reflecting its more stable and regulated political system, Finland stands out with its strongly institutionalised coordination mechanisms. In Lithuania and Romania, on the other hand, each new president brings her own staff, personality and leadership style to the equation. When both countries adopted semi-presidential constitutions, it was for various reasons not perceived important or legitimate to establish coordination mechanisms between the executives. And as the analysis suggests, presidents may well benefit from such absence of regular cooperation.

Discussion

This chapter has contributed to the literature on semi-presidentialism and political leadership through paying attention to coordination mechanisms between the president and the government. The results may not be altogether surprising but they are logical: the more institutionalised

4 However, clashes over security policy can still occur. In 2006 the Romanian PM Tariceanu announced publicly that Romanian troops would withdraw from Afghanistan. President Băsescu disagreed and CSAT did not follow Tariceanu’s recommendation. As a result, the government had to comply with the decision of CSAT (Gherghina & Miscoiu, 2013).

and regular cooperation between the two executives is, the less we find presidential activism and thereby also intra-executive conflict. The absence of coordination in turn produces more tensions and opens the door for presidential activism, not least through public criticism of the cabinet and direct contacts to political parties, the state administration, the legislature, and civil society actors.

At the same time one must exercise caution when drawing lessons from this study. It compared one stable democracy (Finland) with two younger, less institutionalised political regimes (Lithuania and Romania). Furthermore, one cannot exactly measure the importance of coordination mechanisms. For example, the transition to democracy and the broader modernisation of the society have proven difficult in Romania, with poor constitutional design contributing to the high level of intra-executive conflicts (Ghergina, 2015; Elgie, 2018). Yet, one can ask whether the presence of regular coordination mechanisms could have prevented the two impeachments of President Băsescu or the overall assertive presidential behaviour. Similarly one can reflect on how much the relatively smooth intra-executive relations in Finland result from the president meeting both the PM and the whole government almost every week.

The chapter also highlights the interplay between institutional mechanisms, political culture, and party politics. The semi-presidential regimes in Central and Eastern Europe are in general characterised by personality-centred political cultures coupled with low trust in parties and political institutions. This facilitates presidential activism irrespective of the party-political context and makes it possible for individual presidents to create non-constitutional institutions in their own favour. Both Lithuania and Romania have opted not to establish regular intra-executive coordination mechanisms, and this study suggests the need to explore whether the lack of coordination instruments and the observed behavioural patterns apply also to other countries in the region. Institutionalised coordination mechanisms may make politics more boring through reducing public confrontations between the two executives, but they also facilitate policy-making and coherent political leadership, outcomes that are clearly relevant for all semi-presidential countries.

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