Summit Fever: The Reconfiguration of Executive Power and the ‘Intergovernmental Empowerment’ Model

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Abstract

This paper argues that the European Union’s Lisbon Strategy has contributed directly to the empowerment of key ‘core’ executive actors – specifically, heads of state/government and their closest officials/advisors. To explain why, the paper proposes a model of ‘intergovernmental empowerment’ which suggests this occurs through three causal mechanisms (executive activism, legislative overload, and strategic coordination) and three associated forms of intergovernmental ‘spillover’ (cultivated, functional and transgovernmental). The model is illustrated by exploring the role of core executive actors at each stage of the Lisbon policy process, and by analysing shifting patterns of executive empowerment at spring European Council summits since 2000.
Introduction

Over the past few decades, national executives have come to play an increasingly prominent role in the European polity. At the core of the executive hierarchy, power has been gradually concentrated around a narrow section of policy making actors – specifically, heads of state/government and their closest officials/advisors (for example, see Peters et al 2000; Poguntke and Webb 2005; Goetz 2006). Some have sought to attribute this phenomenon to longer-term, structural developments at the European level. First, several scholars have argued that the Europeanisation of national political systems privileges the role of national executives by redistributing key domestic resources, such as access to high-level negotiations and privileged information, in their favour (notably Moravcsik 1994, Dimitrakopoulos 2001, Maurer and Wessels 2001; for a review of the literature, see Goetz and Meyer-Sahling 2008). Second, democratic audits of the new ‘open method of coordination’ suggests that policy making tends to be dominated by executive interaction, with relatively little involvement from parliaments or private actors (see Duina and Raunio 2007; Borrás and Conzelmann 2007; Büchs 2008). Third, Larsson and Trondal (2005) demonstrate that although the Commission activates the lower echelons of domestic administrations, the Council strengthens the domestic politico-administrative leadership of the member states – specifically, the Foreign Office and Prime Minister’s Office. Finally, the growth of European Council summits can also generate pressures for centralisation within national governments (King 1994, Kassim 2003, Laffan 2007). These can cause power to shift away from legislatures and sectoral ministers by conferring authority, discretion and resources on heads of state/government (Johansson and Tallberg 2008).

Despite the accumulation of empirical evidence, there is a tendency within much of the existing literature to avoid specifying the nature of the causal processes involved (for a more extensive critique, see Goetz 2000). In particular little attempt has been made to differentiate the impact of different EU institutions and modes of governance, to explore shifting patterns of executive empowerment over time, or to develop theoretical explanations that move beyond narrow state-centric accounts. In response this paper sets out three questions. To what extent have core executive actors been empowered at both the EU and national levels? How can we theorise and explain this process of executive empowerment? How have patterns of executive empowerment shifted over time? In order to address these, the paper explores the institutional design and development of one of the most important initiatives to have impacted on the role of core executive actors in recent years: the Lisbon Strategy.

The paper proceeds as follows. The first section provides an overview of the institutional development and actor constellation characteristic of the Lisbon Strategy since its launch in 2000. It argues that by enhancing the role of the European Council in initiating, agreeing and implementing policy, the use of new ‘soft’ modes of governance has contributed directly to the empowerment of key core executive actors – specifically, heads of state/government and their closest officials/advisors – relative to other domestic executive and legislative actors. Drawing on both liberal intergovernmentalism and historical institutionalism, the second section sets out to theorise and explain this process by proposing a model of ‘intergovernmental empowerment’. It suggests that empowerment occurs through three causal mechanisms (executive activism, legislative overload, and strategic coordination) and three associated forms of intergovernmental ‘spillover’ (cultivated, functional and transgovernmental). By placing ever-increasing demands and expectations on national leaders, these generate a ‘ratchet effect’ that effectively locks in the role of core executive actors at each stage of the Lisbon process. Third, the paper takes the analysis a stage further...
by exploring how patterns of executive empowerment have shifted over time by analysing ‘outputs’ from spring European Council summits: that is, by measuring the number of actions directed at the Commission, Council or member states as set out in the presidency conclusions over the past decade. It concludes by reflecting on the contribution that the model makes to traditional integration theory and our understanding of ‘soft’ modes of European governance.

The Lisbon Strategy and the European Council

The origins of the new modes of governance within the EU lay in early initiatives aimed at strengthening the coordination of macroeconomic, employment and supply-side policies in the late 1990s – the so-called Cardiff, Cologne and Luxembourg processes (Hodson and Maher 2001). In 2000 the Lisbon Council incorporated these into a single, long-term strategy which aimed to make Europe the most dynamic and competitive knowledge-based economy within ten years. The Lisbon Strategy, as it became known, sought to develop a coherent, synchronised annual process for the EU’s economic and social development (Radaelli 2003). The summit enshrined the use of the new ‘open method of coordination’ as the best suited to achieving this objective, while extending it to new areas such as social inclusion, pension reform, education and research (see Borrás and Jacobsson 2004). In response to a highly critical mid-term review prepared by the former Dutch Prime Minister Wim Kok, the strategy was re-launched in 2005 with the aim of simplifying its objectives, strengthening its internal governance, and enhancing engagement with national governments and stakeholders (see Begg 2006; Radaelli 2006; Büchs 2008).

The open method constituted a radical departure from both the traditional Community method of decision making which necessitated the extensive delegation of competence to autonomous supranational agencies, and informal but relatively closed methods of intergovernmental cooperation and transgovernmental institutionalisation characteristic of the second and third pillars. Instead the Lisbon Strategy sought to develop ‘soft’ modes of governance which aimed to promote policy coordination through the development of non-binding guidelines at the EU level, benchmarking and implementation through national reform programmes, and the promotion of mutual learning and best practice through peer review (see Begg 2006). In short, the open method promised a new mode of policy making: one that was decentralised, non-hierarchical, voluntaristic, network-based, and relatively open and accessible to social and economic stakeholders (Collignon et al 2005; Büchs 2008).

The constellation of institutional actors put in place to manage this process has, one the face of it, changed little over the past decade. The Commission’s initial role was relatively ill-defined and largely limited to administrative functions, such as drawing up the draft guidelines, reviewing national reform programmes, and ‘naming and shaming’ member states (Borrás 2009, p. 100). After 2005 its responsibilities were strengthened and became more explicitly political – less about trying to micro-manage the process from Brussels and more about providing the necessary political momentum to raise its visibility and drive the process forward (Borrás 2009, p. 101). The formal decision making forum remains the Council of Ministers, although responsibility for different aspects of the strategy is divided between the Competitiveness Council, the Economic and Financial Affairs Council (ECOFIN), and the Employment, Social Policy, Health and Consumer Affairs Council (EPSCO). Below this, powerful official-level committees (the Economic Policy Committee, Economic and Financial Committee, Employment Committee, and the Economic and Social Committee) are
responsible for negotiating many of the technical aspects of the strategy, and for managing the peer review process (Collignon et al 2005).

With hindsight, perhaps the most important innovation heralded by the open method was to cap this formal decision making structure with the European Council. Established in 1974, these informal summit meetings of heads of state/government performed four important functions (Hayes-Renshaw and Wallace 2006, pp.170-172): to provide the broad strategic guidelines for policy and political impetus for new initiatives; to shape the EU’s foreign, security and defence policy; to engage in extra-treaty decision-making, such as the appointment of senior figures; and the negotiation of treaty reform through the establishment of an intergovernmental conference. Although its importance has grown over several decades, the Lisbon Strategy transformed the European Council in 2000 by giving it a ‘pre-eminent guiding and coordinating role to ensure overall coherence and the effective monitoring of progress’ (European Council 2000, points 35 and 36). This was given an institutional basis through the designation of a special spring European Council meeting as the forum for discussing and directing the Lisbon process. Here national leaders would launch new initiatives and request proposals, amend and approve the multi-annual Integrated Guidelines, discuss progress towards the implementation of National Lisbon Programmes, and decide whether to issue non-binding recommendations to certain member states (European Council 2000, point 7). Although most of the technical negotiations are left to the relevant sectoral councils, regular summits provide a valuable forum for defining the strategy’s broader strategic objectives, resolving political questions, and holding governments to account through peer pressure (Borrás and Jacobsson 2004). These changes were embedded in a series of reforms introduced by the Seville European Council in 2002 which streamlined the summit process and doubled the frequency of meetings from two to four times a year (Hayes-Renshaw and Wallace 2006, p.183).

Figure 1. The Actor Constellation of the Lisbon Strategy

![Diagram of the Actor Constellation of the Lisbon Strategy](image-url)
Figure 1 provides a simplified representation of the actor constellation and division of responsibilities characteristic of the Lisbon Strategy. Existing studies on the Lisbon Strategy tend to overlook or downplay the importance of the European Council – perhaps a reflection of the fact that until 2009 it was not, strictly speaking, a ‘formal’ part of the EU institutional architecture at all. This paper sets out to address this gap in the literature. It is argued that the Lisbon Strategy has led to a reconfiguration of the institutional balance of power at the heart of the EU as the European Council has absorbed tasks and competences previously undertaken by the Council and Commission (Werts 2008, p.184). This has had a profound impact upon the national core executive, defined here as ‘all those organisations and structures which primarily serve to pull together and integrate central government policies’ (Dunleavy and Rhodes 1990, p.4). In particular, key actors – specifically, heads of state/government and their closest officials/advisors – are now engaged at every stage of the Lisbon policy process: launching new economic and social policy initiatives, prescribing the legislation that it wants the Commission to draft, intervening in the legislative process to broker compromise, and monitoring implementation by national governments (Radaelli 2003, p.15).

In order to understand how the changing role of the European Council translates into empowerment at the national level, we need to theorise and explain the way in which the Lisbon Strategy has contributed to increasing demands, obligations and expectations on core executive actors at each stage of the policy process. The following section reflects on the utility of traditional state-centric accounts as a theoretical framework for doing so.

Explaining Executive Empowerment

Explaining the empowerment of core executive actors requires a broader understanding of the dynamics shaping the integration process over the past decade. Moravcsik’s (1993, 1998) theory of liberal intergovernmentalism offers an obvious starting point for understanding the rise of the European Council. Its principal contribution would be emphasise the desire of heads of state/government to retain tight control over issues characterised by high levels of domestic salience, such as labour market reform and pensions. Although the Commission was delegated important administrative and later political responsibilities over the Lisbon Strategy, the European Council’s ‘pre-eminent guiding role’ was designed to ensure that coordination would remain ‘open’ in terms of outcomes, limit attempts to further centralise policy formation, and prevent the development of more hierarchical methods of integration (Hodson and Maher 2001, p.739). Moreover, the use of the EU’s intergovernmental institution par excellence (the European Council) as the principal forum for doing so may also reflect the strategic interests of national leaders from the (larger) member states that are able to wield the greatest influence. Moravcsik (1994) also claims that European integration strengthens national executives by redistributing domestic political resources in their favour. It does so in four key respects: by shifting control over domestic agendas (initiative); altering domestic decision-making procedures (institutions); magnifying informational asymmetries (information); and multiplying the domestic ideological justifications for policies (ideas).

Although this argument remains persuasive, it is inadequate as a framework for analysing the complex patterns of empowerment that characterise the Lisbon Strategy in at least four key respects. First, Moravcsik’s theory relates to generic features of international negotiations and organisations. Although the EU is held up as a particularly good example of executive empowerment through intergovernmental cooperation, there is no attempt to differentiate
between the impact of different EU institutions or modes of governance. Second, its reliance on empirical examples of empowerment as a consequence of high-profile intergovernmental conferences and summit meetings means that it fails to capture the depth or breadth of involvement by core executive actors. This focus on the impact of ‘history-making decisions’ ignores the extent to which routine policy-shaping decisions characterised by low levels of salience may also lead to a reconfiguration of patterns of power dependency between different domestic policy actors. Hence although the theory is useful at accounting for the key role of the European Council in areas like macroeconomic and employment policy, it is far less useful at explaining the increasing involvement of core executive actors in policies like energy, transport, and research and development. Third, liberal intergovernmentalism tends to downplay the centrality of the Commission in the open method of coordination. Although principal-agent analysis helps to explain the delegation of key administrative tasks by the European Council (see Wessels and Schäfer 2007), this ignores the degree of autonomy, the space for agenda setting, and the more explicitly political role that the Commission has developed since 2005 (Borrás 2009). Because of the tendency to view the distribution of executive power at the EU level in zero-sum terms, there is little scope for understanding the lack of animosity or exploring the degree of mutual interdependency between the European Council and European Commission.

Finally, state-centric theories assume that national governments act rationally in deciding to award themselves a pre-eminent role in the management of the Lisbon Strategy. There are two grounds for questioning this. Firstly, it imposes a tremendous burden on national governments, particularly those with smaller and less well-resourced public administrations. Second, a 2002 report compiled by Javier Solana was highly critical of the way in which the European Council had become overloaded with relatively trivial policy details, such as ‘laborious low-level drafting work’ (see Ludlow 2002, pp.269-73). Given these deficiencies, we need to consider the possibility that these developments are driven by wider structural factors at the EU level, rather than simply reflecting strategic calculation on the part of national leaders.

A Model of Intergovernmental Empowerment

This paper suggests that the development of new modes of governance associated with the Lisbon Strategy has served to empower key actors within national core executives – specifically, heads of state/government and their immediate coterie of officials/advisors – at both the EU and domestic levels. In order to provide a more accurate explanation of this process, we propose a theoretical account of ‘intergovernmental empowerment’ that draws on both liberal intergovernmentalism and historical institutionalism. It suggests that the gradual empowerment of core executive actors derives, in essence, from the privileged role and accumulation of power awarded to the European Council through the Lisbon Strategy. This self-reinforcing process generates a powerful ‘ratchet effect’ which over time contributes to ever-increasing demands and expectations on national leaders. By accommodating these, the European Council ‘locks in’ the role and influence of these actors at each stage of the policy process.
Figure 2. The Intergovernmental Empowerment Model

Figure 2 charts the flow of Lisbon-related initiatives as they pass through the three principal stages of the EU policy process (policy initiation, interstate bargaining, and policy implementation), at each of which the European Council plays a critical role. Intergovernmental empowerment operates at each of these stages through three corresponding causal mechanisms (executive activism, legislative overload and strategic coordination) and spillover processes (cultivated, functional and transgovernmental). Although spillover in this context derives from a variety of different sources (the Commission, Council of Ministers and other national governments), its impact is strictly intergovernmental: in other words, it strengthens national core executives, not supranational institutions.

This section of the paper explores each of these empowerment mechanisms and spillover processes in detail, drawing upon existing and new empirical evidence from the development and design of the Lisbon Strategy over the past ten years.

1. Executive Activism: Empowerment through Cultivated Spillover

Executive activism is concerned with the prominent role that core executive actors play in policy initiation through the new modes of governance. Because the Lisbon Strategy constitutes a form of political competition in which member states strike voluntary agreements on joint goals (Börzel 2010, p.207), national leaders are encouraged to strengthen their role in order to enhance the projection of national preferences into the EU arena. Although the Commission enjoys the exclusive right to initiate ‘hard’ legislation and draft the Integrated Guidelines, it is the European Council that defines the Lisbon Strategy’s strategic direction and shapes its annual agenda (Duina and Raunio 2007). Typically the Council Presidency, together with many of the larger member states, will try to upload issues for
discussion at formal and informal meetings, actively lobby the Commission and other national leaders, and insert formulations into summit conclusions that function as ‘hooks’ for future steps (Tallberg 2006, pp.84-86). Consequently the Commission refrains from issuing draft proposals until formally requested in summit conclusions and has a tendency to issue them directly to national leaders for approval prior to sending them to the Council or Parliament (Werts 2008, pp.47-48). The open method of coordination therefore reverses the traditional Community method of decision making: although the European Commission and European Council share responsibility for developing new ideas and proposals, it is only the latter that wields the necessary political authority to formally request a new policy initiative. This contrasts with single market or competition policy where the Commission acts more autonomously in initiating new legislation.

One consequence of this has been the further diminution of the executive function of the Council of Ministers. Its capacity to initiate policy through the Lisbon Strategy has long been constrained by the fact that responsibility remains divided between different councils, coordination is weak, and inter-ministerial rivalry still rife (Borràs 2009, p.107). These trends were reinforced by the Seville reforms in 2002 which aimed at streamlining and strengthening the summit process. One particular innovation was that responsibility for drafting the summit agendas and presidency conclusions in advance was delegated to the Committee of Permanent Representatives (Coreper) and prime ministerial ‘sherpas’: usually a private secretary or high councillor located in the prime minister’s office who serves as the principal policy advisor on EU affairs, and commonly represents the head of government in high-level EU meetings (Werts 2008, p.64). This has relegated the General Affairs Council to simply ‘rubber-stamping’ pre-negotiated draft agreements with little substantive discussion or input (Gomez and Peterson 2001, p.71).

Contrary to intergovernmentalist assumptions, it is argued here that increased activism by core executive actors is encouraged and facilitated by the European Commission. As a strategic actor in its own right, the Commission seeks to exploit the expanding role of the European Council as a way of strengthening its own position vis-à-vis the Council of Ministers and European Parliament. This ‘cultivated’ form of spillover is apparent in three ways. First, the Commission serves as an important source of advice, expertise and draft proposals, without which the European Council would be largely powerless in new and highly technical policy fields (Duina and Raunio 2007, p.497). The President regularly attends summit meetings and participates in discussions, providing privileged access to national leaders, valuable information on member state preferences, and an ability to contribute to high-level negotiations (Wessels and Schäfer 2007). Since the re-launch in 2005, the Commission has also played an important part in raising the Lisbon Strategy’s visibility and maintaining momentum between summit meetings (Borràs 2009).

Second, commissioners frequently bypass the Council by actively lobbying heads of state/government and their sherpas to formally ‘request’ a proposal in summit conclusions (Werts 2008, p.47). Although marginalised during the early phase of the Lisbon Strategy, the Commission’s role as a source of new policy ideas was strengthened in 2005 through the submission of annual Progress Reports to each spring summit. For example, the first report recommended that the European Council should launch a new Partnership for Growth and Jobs, called for member states to establish their own National Action Programmes, and requested that they approve the new governance arrangements as set out by the Commission (European Commission 2005a). Similarly in 2006 it explicitly invited the European Council to ‘call on member states’ to appoint national Lisbon coordinators, and to instruct the Council
and Parliament to give priority to finalising outstanding legislative actions (European Commission 2006b, pp.15-16). It is also common for the Commission to request formal endorsement for specific proposals (European Commission 2006b, p.13) or detailed action plans (European Commission 2008, p.19), and has even manipulated summit conclusions in order to add issues that were not discussed at meetings (Werts 2008, p.53). Although the effective right to initiate policy still resides with heads of state/government, the Commission has become more adept at shaping the summit agenda by framing the terms of the debate.

Finally, the Commission increasingly exploits the tacit approval of the European Council for its proposals, and/or the threat of referring issues back to national leaders, in order to pressurise the Council and Parliament into approving them. This may explain why the Commission supported the strengthening of the European Council’s role in 2005 on the grounds that it would provide ‘even stronger guidance’ (European Commission 2005a, p.32) and permit ‘political ownership to be taken at the highest level’ (European Commission 2005b, p.5). Far from being a passive supranational agent awaiting political instruction from national principals, cultivated spillover presents the Commission as a strategic actor capable and willing to exploit its superior administrative resources in an attempt to shape the deliberations and decisions of core executive actors. Contrary to the zero-sum assumptions underpinning liberal intergovernmentalism, the European Council and European Commission therefore increasingly constitute an ‘unholy alliance’ (Wessels and Schäfer 2007).

The increasing visibility of the European Council impacts directly at the domestic level through increased executive activism: forcing heads of state/government and their officials to engage more pro-actively in pre-summit preparation, lobbying and negotiation. As these actors become more important in driving the EU agenda forward at the supranational level, so departmental policy leads at the national level increasingly look towards them for policy direction and to exploit opportunities for lobbying (James 2010). Consequently prime minister’s offices are forced to play an increasingly important part in the day-to-day formulation and coordination of governmental negotiating positions: departments look to them for guidance as to the prime minister’s preferred position and to define the government’s strategic objectives. Although prime minister’s offices have always performed this important function, the frequency of summit meetings and their importance in steering the development of the Lisbon Strategy dictates that the burden has greatly increased over the past decade (Goetz 2006, Johansson and Tallberg 2008).

2. Legislative Overload: Empowerment through Functional Spillover

The second causal mechanism of intergovernmental empowerment suggests that empowerment occurs at the level of interstate bargaining as a consequence of legislative overload within the Council of Ministers. This arises when issues and decisions have to be escalated for arbitration and resolution by heads of state/government because sectoral ministers are simply unable to agree (Collignon et al 2005, p.11). Quantitative studies tend to find little direct evidence of legislative gridlock because they rely on the analysis of roll call data of Council voting (for example see Neyer 2004; Heisenberg 2005; Hayes-Renshaw et al 2006; Hagemann 2008; Mattila 2008). Hence on the basis of existing data Wallace (2007, pp.5-6) concludes that the ‘business as usual’ picture is more convincing than the ‘gridlock picture’ as regards the impact of the 2004 enlargement on the EU institutions. However, although the frequency of votes and the passage of legislation have not declined per se, this
masks the extent to which core executive actors intervene on an informal basis to resolve disputes at a lower level.

Although this has always been an important function of the European Council, qualitative studies suggest that this may be increasing for four reasons. First, the role of the General Affairs Council as overall coordinator has been progressively undermined and its function gradually transferred to the European Council (Wall 2008, pp.193-4). As well as becoming overloaded with policy issues escalated from sectoral councils and the growth of the EU’s foreign and security policy, foreign ministers lack the expertise to deal with increasingly complex dossiers and the political authority to arbitrate between their ministerial colleagues (Gomez and Peterson 2001, p.72). Second, although sectoral ministers have responded to overload by delegating decisions of low salience (usually subject to the Community Method) downwards to working group level, decisions of high salience (characterised by intergovernmental processes or the open method of coordination) tend to be escalated to heads of state/government level. The European Council therefore offers a ‘quick fix’ for clearing blockages within the Council machinery (Hayes Renshaw and Wallace 2006, p.175). Third, the impact of enlargement has meant that the sheer number of participants has made working group meetings increasingly unwieldy and inefficient (James 2010). As a result, relatively mundane issues are increasingly resolved on the margins of summit meetings by informal networks of prime ministers’ EU advisors, with heads of state/government acting as final arbiters (Tallberg 2007, p.36). Finally, enlargement has also necessitated the increasing use of ‘issue linkage’ in order to facilitate agreement between states (Tallberg 2006, p.117). Although the Presidency serves as the lead actor, the negotiation of complex package deals imposes a greater burden on core executive actors because only they have the political authority and strategic capacity to do so.

Empowerment through legislative overload occurs because the horizontal transfer of responsibility from the Council of Ministers to the European Council is mirrored at the domestic level. As heads of state/government and their officials/advisors are increasingly forced to engage with technical policy dossiers at the EU level, so they will inevitably tend to intervene in the work of lead departments at home. In addition, as the European Council absorbs more responsibility for brokering agreement in one policy area, it will generate demands and expectations for an increased role in other, related policy areas (Gomez and Peterson 2001). EU policy making may be particularly prone to this form of ‘functional’ spillover because of the gradual blurring of the boundary between EU and domestic policy at the national level. This is all the more apparent for initiatives like the Lisbon Strategy which rely on non-hierarchical forms of governance that try to integrate common objectives across a wide spectrum of horizontal policy fields. In this instance intervention by heads of state/government in the development of ‘core’ Lisbon policies (such as employment policy) may overlap with related issue areas (for example, welfare policy). Consequently the strategy serves to encourage and legitimise intervention by core executive actors across a wide swathe of domestic policy. This led to a proposal in 2001 for the establishment of a secure electronic communication network, known as ‘PrimeNet’, between the offices of all EU leaders (James 2010). Although the scheme stalled owing to disagreement over the use of technology, it nonetheless reflected a serious attempt to institutionalise the growing importance of prime minister’s offices in the EU legislative process.
3. Strategic Coordination: Empowerment through Transgovernmental Spillover

Perhaps the most obvious manifestation of empowerment is apparent at the stage of policy implementation – that is, the strategic coordination and oversight of the Lisbon Strategy. The open method of coordination encourages member states to compete for best performance in reaching joint goals and best practices that trigger processes of mutual learning (Börzel 2010, p.207). However, because the initiative spans a range of salient policy dossiers, the strategy’s broad objectives risk being lost amid domestic departmental ‘silos’. To counter these centrifugal tendencies, strong central coordination from a relatively small number of officials with the political authority and strategic overview to coordinate disparate departments is essential (Radaelli 2003; Zeitlin et al 2005; Goetz and Meyer-Sahling 2008). It also demands that prime minister’s offices engage more directly with substantive policy issues and to expand their ‘in house’ policy expertise (James 2010).

This trend was reinforced by the 2005 re-launch of the strategy which sought to strengthen the governance of Lisbon by instilling greater coherence in the policy making process. One outcome of this was the consolidation of member state responses into a single National Reform Programme, designed to reduce political and administrative fragmentation at the domestic level (Begg 2006, p.2). The formulation of these programmes has played an important role in encouraging the further centralisation of Lisbon coordination at the centre of government (see in particular, Zeitlin et al 2005; Heidenreich and Zeitlin 2009). For example, it is commonplace for the European Council to request transposition of legislation or the implementation of action plans by a particular deadline, as well as monitoring and demanding progress reports at regular intervals (Werts 2008). In response core executive actors have effectively become national coordinators for the strategy – responsible for overseeing the development of national reforms, ‘naming and shaming’ departments for their transposition records, and holding senior officials to account for compliance with EU level guidelines. The strengthening of domestic level coordination has been reinforced over time by ‘transgovernmental’ spillover that operates through processes of mutual learning and administrative transfer (James 2010). If those states that are perceived as being the most effective at transposing Lisbon legislation and implementing the guidelines do so through a system of centralised coordination, then all governments will be encouraged to emulate that approach. This may simply be because a state wishes to enhance its Lisbon scoreboard performance or because the Commission explicitly identifies a particular arrangement as an example of best practice.

Perhaps the clearest manifestation of this type of spillover has been the gradual appointment of national Lisbon coordinators within national core executives in an effort to enhance implementation. In 2000 several governments proposed the formal designation of prime ministerial sherpas to serve as ‘Mr/Ms Lisbon’ with overarching responsibility for the strategy within each member state (Werts 2008, p.77). Although the proposal was initially rejected, many governments subsequently appointed a senior figure (usually within the prime minister’s office) to serve as the principal coordinator for the Lisbon Strategy across government (European Commission 2006b, p.6). The rise of this powerful network was finally acknowledged as an example of best practice in 2005 when the Commission recommended that henceforth ‘member states will enhance their internal coordination, where appropriate by appointing a Lisbon national coordinator’ (European Council 2005, point 39c). The following year the Commission recommended that all member states that had not yet done so should appoint national Lisbon coordinators at a political level and pledged to seek to strengthen their existing role (European Commission 2006b, p.15). This was to form an
important part of the new ‘partnership approach’ with national governments which aimed to ‘facilitate cooperation and public visibility’ (European Commission 2006a, p.3) and to provide more effective ‘energy and focus’ for the re-launched strategy (European Commission 2006b, p.3). It also called for increased cooperation between national coordinators and aimed to facilitate the exchange of best practice by organising regular ‘sharing success’ seminars in Brussels (European Commission 2007, p.17). In doing so the Commission sought to facilitate and institutionalise transgovernmental spillover by incorporating it into the formal coordination process.

**Analysing Shifting Patterns of Executive Empowerment**

The model outlined above does not presuppose that intergovernmental empowerment has been a continuous, linear and incremental process. On the contrary, we would expect to find that domestic-level empowerment will fluctuate in accordance with the shifting fortunes of the Lisbon Strategy and the evolving role of the European Council. In order to gain a clearer understanding of how patterns of executive empowerment have shifted over time, the paper takes the analysis a stage further by exploring the changing role and responsibilities of core executive actors within the European Council since 2000. This can be done empirically by measuring summit ‘outputs’: in this case, the content of the presidency conclusions for each spring European Council.

Although these political statements consist largely of general principals and strategic aims, it is also commonplace for national leaders to ‘request’, ‘ask’ or ‘urge’ the Commission, the Council and the member states to undertake a specific action. For example, the Commission can be asked to develop a legislative proposal within a set timeframe, conduct a review of existing initiatives, or explore a particular policy issue. As such the data provides a rudimentary but useful measure of policy initiative by heads of state/government within the European Council. With respect to the Council, ministers are regularly implored to consider new proposals, report on progress, or reach agreement with the European Parliament on a new directive by a fixed deadline. Although the figures cannot accurately record the frequency with which core executive actors exert informal pressure to resolve problems lower down, they can provide a general indication of the extent to which national leaders feel the need to intervene in order to accelerate the legislative process. Finally, the summit conclusions provide a detailed outline of the legislation, programmes, action plans or strategic objectives which member states are expected to implement and/or which provide a guide to domestic reform. Not only does this illustrate the extent to which heads of state/government now concern themselves with substantive policy implementation, it also offers a guide as to the political pressures and obligations that the European Council imposes on national administrations. Table 1 below compiles figures for the number of individual actions requested by the spring European Council for each year between 2000 and 2009.
Table 1. Spring European Council Actions, 2000-2009

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Commission</th>
<th>Council</th>
<th>Member states</th>
<th>Total</th>
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<td>53</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>147</td>
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<td>2001</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>9</td>
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<td>2002</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>42</td>
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<td>2003</td>
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<td>66</td>
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<td>35</td>
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<td>2005</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>31</td>
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<td>2006</td>
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<td>54</td>
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Figure 3. Spring European Council – Actions by Actor
Figures 3 and 4 offer three important insights. First, the data reveals no evidence that core executive actors are any less active at the end of the decade than at the beginning. This is surprising given that the 2002 Seville reforms sought to streamline and simplify the summit process by unburdening the European Council from having to deal with relatively trivial policy matters (see Ludlow 2002, pp. 269-73). On the contrary, if we compare the figures for the Lisbon Strategy before and after its re-launch in 2005, we find that the European Council has in fact become more important: the mean number of total actions before 2005 is 103.8, but after 2005 it increases to 117.8. Hence although activity within the European Council has fluctuated considerably over time, the longer term trend has been towards the further empowerment of national core executives.

Second, the variability of summit ‘outputs’ is closely correlated with wider political developments. As one would expect, the peak years for requesting actions from the Commission occurred at the Lisbon Strategy’s launch in 2000, and the years following its re-launch in 2005/6. Similarly, the relatively high figures for the re-launched strategy after 2005 reflects a particularly intensive period of activity in which specific initiatives were launched at the spring summit, notably the European Pact for Gender Equality (2006), the European Energy Strategy (2007), and the renewed focus on research and development (2008). The publication of the Kok Report and the ongoing deliberations surrounding the reform of the strategy helps to explain the low point in 2004; while the 2009 figure simply reflects the extent to which the summit agenda was dominated by the financial crisis and the European Economic Recovery Plan, which had the effect of sidelining Lisbon Strategy initiatives. This finding is significant not only because it demonstrates the wide fluctuation in the role and importance of core executive actors over time. It also suggests that any analysis of executive empowerment at the domestic level will be particularly time sensitive, and necessitates empirical analysis over a period of at least ten years in order to provide an accurate picture of underlying trends.
Finally, the data shows that the precise role of the European Council alternates frequently. Although requests to the Council constituted the most common action prior to 2005, the later period was characterised by a greater focus on member state implementation. This suggests that the original Lisbon Strategy was characterised by the greater use of directives and regulations which necessitated greater intervention by core executive elites in the legislative process to secure agreement. By contrast, the re-launched strategy placed a far greater emphasis on coordination, implementation and learning through best practice at the national level – reflecting the natural limits of what could be achieved through traditional ‘hard’ legislation, and the importance attached to fostering a greater sense of national ownership of the strategy after 2005. In addition, and perhaps more surprisingly, the average number of requests directed at the Commission is higher for the re-launched strategy (the mean figure is 27.4 before 2005 and 35.8 after 2005). The initiation of new policies associated with the Lisbon Strategy therefore shows no sign of declining. However, as a guide to the demands, obligations and expectations that the European Council places on core executive actors within the domestic policy process, analysis of the summit conclusions suggests that legislative overload and strategic coordination are likely to have been more significant as a source of empowerment at home than executive activism.

Conclusion

To conclude, the paper considers the contribution that the intergovernmental empowerment model makes to traditional integration theory, and to our broader understanding of new ‘soft’ modes of European governance. It offers two specific reflections.

First, the paper argues that the pre-eminent role of national core executives within the EU is here to stay for the foreseeable future as it has become ‘locked in’ to the system. It confirms Moravcsik’s (1994) claim that international cooperation provides valuable access to high-level negotiations and privileged information, and serves as an important source of ideological legitimacy for domestic policies. But it also demonstrates that a liberal intergovernmentalist account of core executive empowerment provides only part of the picture. The gradual accumulation of power around the European Council cannot be reduced to a simple cost-benefit calculation on the part of national core executive actors. Instead the model presented here suggests that intergovernmental empowerment is ‘sticky’ and path dependent. The Lisbon Strategy, and the new modes of governance that it has pioneered, has given rise to powerful feedback dynamics that increase the demands and expectations on core executive actors at the domestic level. By accommodating these, governments create a ‘ratchet effect’ that entrenches the role and importance of heads of state/governments and their officials at both the EU and domestic levels. Rather than simply being a deliberate strategy pursued by national leaders, empowerment has a tendency to ‘spillover’ from related policy fields as a consequence of functional necessity, from other member states through learning and best practice, and/or be actively cultivated by the European Commission. Contrary to neofunctionalist logic, spillover is therefore not limited to supranational outcomes – instead it can give rise to intergovernmental processes that serve to entrench and enhance the role of national core executives.

Second, the paper suggests that the open method of coordination has not quite lived up to its promise as a ‘new’ mode of governance that is decentralised, non-hierarchical, voluntaristic, network-based, and relatively open and accessible to social and economic stakeholders
(Collignon et al. 2005). On the contrary, the leading role awarded to national core executives through the Lisbon Strategy betrays the fact that these ‘new’ modes have much in common with traditional intergovernmental policy making: highly centralised, relatively closed, dominated by national political elites, and with very little involvement from parliaments or private actors (see Duina and Raunio 2007; Borrás and Conzelmann 2007; Büchs 2008). There is one important caveat however: the crucial role of the European Commission. This not only reveals the intergovernmental assumption that the distribution of executive power at the EU level is a zero sum game to be false. It also confirms that the European executive has been a willing accomplice in the institutionalisation and expansion of national core executive power through the European Council over the past decade. The dilemma of European governance may therefore be that soft forms appear to require a ‘shadow of hierarchy’ to solve policy problems (Börzel 2010): in the case of the Lisbon Strategy, overarching intergovernmental hierarchy is provided by the European Council, but is cultivated and buttressed by the day-to-day supranational hierarchy of the Commission.

**Bibliography**


