

The Nordic States and Agenda-Setting in the European Union:

How Do Small States Score?

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Abstract

This paper examines whether particular subjective features are better suited than objective feature, to study the ability of the Nordic EU member states to have a say within the environmental policy of the EU. The Nordic states will be placed within a conceptual framework intended to explain states' ability to exercise influence internationally. The paper will argue that traditional quantitative measures normally defining size of states, such as the population, territorial size, GDP and military strength, do not give a clear picture of their influence within the EU. The paper argues that subjective features, which are concerned with how various domestic and external actors regard the Nordic states in environmental matters, have enabled the Nordic states to punch above their weight in EU environmental policy-making. Also, it is maintained here that features such as Nordic politicians' ambitions and prioritizations and their ideas about EU decision-making processes may indicate their states' ability to influence within the Union. Furthermore, we claim that states' administrative competence and the degree of domestic cohesion, combined with the degree to which the state maintains an external united front are important indicators of their success in the EU.

Introduction

Realist scholars have argued that a state's power is built on quantitative factors such as its military capacity, economic status, and to some extent its geographical size and population size. According to this view, small states such as the Nordic states should lack power in international relations (Mearsheimer 2001, Goetschel 1998:13-14). In this article we challenge this realist-based standpoint and claim that we should not merely focus on objective factors such as military capacity, population size and geographical size in order to determine a state's size. Rather, we need to shift our focus towards subjective factors in order to determine states' capacities and approaches in the international system.



The article is intended to contribute to studies on small states, which have increasingly focused on subjective, rather than objective, features in determining countries' international approaches. The concepts of vulnerability (Vital 1967; Handel 1981; Jalan 1982; Katzenstein 1985) and constraints (Katzenstein 1997) have been sidelined and concepts such as opportunities, smartness, salience (Browning 2006) and resilience (Briguglio, Cordina & Kisanga 2006) have been brought forward within small state studies. In establishing causes of small states' international activities, the focus is on the role of features such as perception, image, discourse and administrative characteristics (Neumann & Gstöhl 2004; Hansen & Wæver 2002; Ingebritsen 2002; Gstöhl 2002; Thorhallsson 2000). Concurrently, there has been a move away from the aforementioned realist emphasis (Pace 2001) on the power that countries possess to the power they exercise, i.e. towards a relational definition of small states (Mouritzen & Wivel 2005). Thus, a state may be influential in one relation but simultaneously weak in another, i.e. it may be considered small in one policy area but large in another. Attempts have also been made to use a combination of objective and subjective indicators to define the size of states and explain their international strategies (Vayrynen 1971; Archer & Nugent 2002). Keohane argued as early as 1969 that subjective factors, combined with the psychological dimension, should be used to classify states in terms of size and influence in the international system. Hence, instead of focusing on perceptions of whether security can be maintained primarily by means of a state's own resources, one should focus on the systemic role that the leaders of the state see their country play (Keohane 1968).

However, traditional International Relations (IR) theories continued to focus predominantly on states' objective capabilities (Neumann & Gstöhl 2004). Furthermore, the small state literature needs to broaden its framework even further in order to explain fully small states' ability to have a say and take a lead in international organizations. Research on how states, which are defined as small states according to quantitative measurements, have been able to exercise influence internationally is still a field with very limited empirical findings. The current study is intended to make an empirical, as well as a theoretical, contribution to this restricted research field. Theoretically, we advance the debate about the size and capacities of states by presenting and testing a theoretical framework developed by Thorhallsson, which is intended to capture subjective as well as objective features of a state's size¹. Empirically, we aim to make a contribution by analyzing the Nordic EU member states' performance and influence within the Environmental Policy of the EU. With the empirical analysis, we aim to demonstrate that the Nordic states' influences within the Environmental Policy of the EU are first and foremost based on several subjective power factors presented in our theoretical framework. Environmental politics are an interesting case for those interested in small states studies, since the Nordic states have an established international reputation as environmental forerunners, and even eco-entrepreneurs, despite their small size.

The goals of the article can be summarized in the following research questions:

- 1) How does the concept of size reflect states' potential power within the different policy sectors of the EU?

- 2) What features may help small states, such as the Nordic states, to defend their interests and influence decision-making within the Union?

Methodological considerations and material

When designing a study, one has to determine its ontological and epistemological stance, which can have considerable influence on the choice and use of methods and theory. Scholars such as Marsh and Furlong (2002) and Hollis and Smith (1991) claim that social scientists either aim to *explain* certain phenomena or *understand* them, and this underlying distinction is based on their ontological and epistemological standpoints. In line with this view, one's ontological position would either be scientific/empiricist or hermeneutic in its nature (Marsh and Furlong 2002:20, Rosamond: 2000:7, Hollis and Smith 1991). If choosing the former ontological position one would, according to this view, choose a positivist epistemology, aiming to explain a causal relationship between social phenomena (Diez and Wiener 2004:16, Marsh and Furlong 2002:22). If, on the other hand, one chooses the latter (hermeneutic) position, one leans towards a more interpretative and normative epistemology where the main emphasis is on *understanding* the social phenomena and the world we live in (Marsh and Furlong 2002:26). However, several scholars such as King *et al.* (1994) and Bjereld *et al.* (1999), claim that there is not such a sharp distinction between positivism and interpretism, and thus between explaining and understanding, and that researchers can indeed seek a middle position and make eclectic use of various aspects/methods associated with both these ontological positions (Bjereld *et al.* 1999:66-67, King *et al.* 1994:34). In this paper, we lean towards this middle stance and aim to create an interplay between explaining and understanding. The ontological position and methods lean more towards the interpretist tradition but an attempt to establish causal explanations in the spirit of positivism is also made.

The empirical findings and the cases presented in this paper are based on a Ph.D. study² completed in 2009, exploring the Nordic member states' influence³ on the Environmental Policy of the EU. The Ph.D. study was a comparative case study mainly conducted with qualitative methods such as interviewing and document analysis in connection with process-tracing. In the Ph. D. study the original national interests of the Nordic states were mapped in several environmental cases and then the process leading to a formal piece of legislation or policy decision at the EU level was analysed. Furthermore, four potential power resources⁴, available to small states, were detected and their importance on various stages in the decision-making process was analysed.

The present paper presents a few of the empirical cases which are to be found in the the Ph. D. study in question. The cases are quite different from one another and focus on various environmental problems but their commonality is that they are all cases where the Nordic member states were able to make their voice heard and promote their national interests within the EU's Environmental Policy *despite* objections and/or lack of interest from other member states and/or the Commission

(Magnusdottir 2009/2010). Interviews with 47 Nordic and non-Nordic officials⁵ and officials at the DG Environment of the Commission, who were involved in environmental policy-making within the Union in 2005-09⁶, were an important source of information.

The interviews were focused in the sense that all the interviewees were asked standardized questions (see appendix in Magnusdottir 2009), regardless of when the interviews were taken. However, the interviews were open-ended in the sense that the interviewees were also allowed to speak freely on the subject of which they had the best knowledge and on which the most valuable information could be obtained for the study. Due to the fact that some of the questions asked, (see appendix in Magnusdottir 2009), especially those concerning the image and/or self-image of the member states, could be considered sensitive, anonymity was offered to all interviewees. This was done in order to encourage the interviewees, both Nordic and non-Nordic, to speak freely about their opinions and relations with the Nordic member states without being concerned that their answers could be traced back to them.

Various sources of secondary literature, primary documents from the European Commission and the Council, written evaluations and reports from the European Environment Bureau, statistical reports from the European Environment Agency and documents from the Nordic environmental ministries and other governmental agencies were also used in the Ph. D. study. These documents were analysed primarily for cross-checking, clarification and for deepening the author's understanding of the cases presented. The aim in the selection of the various types of material was to make a data triangulation in which the different sources of information would support each other and confirm each other in order to increase the validity of the study (Yin 2002:99). In the current article, however, the main focus is on the interviews, since two of the three subjective size factors discussed in this article are linked to: a) the importance of self-perception and others' perception and b) the formation of states' preferences, which is highly influenced by how the state in question perceives its status in the international system and how others perceive the state and its importance. Consequently, in this paper, interviews were deemed the most important source to explore both the Nordic EU member states' environmental self-image and how other member states as well as officials at the DG Environment of the Commission perceive them in environmental matters and how these factors affect the environmental preferences and ambitions of the Nordic EU members.

Subjective size factors as analytical tools

The conceptual framework outlined in this paper emphasizes six categories, three of which can be seen as objective factors and the other three as subjective factors, and which are considered important by domestic and international actors in defining the size of a country in comparison with the size of other countries. The paper highlights how the three subjective factors of the framework, the so-called 'perceptual size', 'preference size' and 'political size' may account for 'small' states' ability to influence decision-making within international organizations such as the EU. When discussing the subjective factors, the term "size" does not refer to any traditional quantitative

measurements, but rather the *influence* these subjective factors can entail.

Accordingly the Nordic states would not be defined as influential actors according to the quantitative variables defining the size of states and their potential power within the EU. For instance, their population is less than 4 per cent of the total EU population. They have less than 7 per cent of votes in the Council and their parliamentarians account for 6 per cent of all MEPs. Still, they are over-represented, according to the number of inhabitants, in the Council and the European Parliament (Magnusdottir 2009/2010). Moreover, the Nordic states' administrative capacity, measured in the traditional way, indicates less ability to influence within the Union compared to the capabilities of some other member states. For instance, the environmental ministries in the EU Nordic states have far fewer employees in comparison with the environmental ministries of the Netherlands, France and Germany, as will be discussed below. However, according to a large majority of the non-Nordic interviewees, the Nordic member states are said to be more influential and to hold more power than their mere size would indicate in policy areas such as the environmental and social policies of the EU (non-Nordic officials, including Commission officials, in 2005-2009; see also Ingebritsen 2006; Kronsell 2002). This is also the case regarding their influence in the international system (Archer 2003; Jakobsen 2005).

These and other objective factors do, of course, contribute to the notion of the size of states and their international capabilities and are given emphasis within the conceptual framework. This is laid out in the framework by the 'fixed size' category (which is based on population and size of territory) and the 'economic size' category (which includes the size of GDP and the market and development success). The last category addresses whether the state can maintain effective sovereignty on its territory and is able to maintain a minimum state structure and presence at an international level – this is termed its 'sovereignty size' (Thorhallsson 2006). However, as has already been stated, this paper seeks to concentrate on the three subjective categories mentioned, and leaves the objective categories aside in order to examine how the Nordic states are able to protect their interests and have a say within our case study, which concerns the EU's Environmental Policy. Accordingly, the paper focuses on the domestic and international notions of smallness and largeness of the states in each of the three subjective categories.

Notions of 'action competence,' referring to the ability of states to formulate and implement policies domestically and to influence decisions internationally - and their vulnerability in these respects - are of key concern in the conceptual framework. Accordingly, the features that determine states' internal and external capacity and vulnerability form the basis of the framework. Small states within the EU are bound to face challenging questions, such as: how can small states influence EU decisions despite their few votes in the Council, few MEPs and much smaller national administration compared with the states traditionally regarded the larger member states, i.e. Germany, France, Britain, Italy, Poland and Spain?

The paper provides answers to these questions by placing the Nordic states within

the three subjective categories of the framework. First, perceptual size refers to the importance of how domestic and external actors regard the state in question: for instance, whether or not they regard the state as being in the forefront concerning environmental protection. Second, preference size refers to the significance of ambitions and prioritizations of the governing elite in the state in question and the elite's ideas about the international system: for instance, whether the elite prioritizes its work and believes it can have a say concerning the EU's environmental policy. Third, political size refers to the importance of administrative competence and the degree of domestic cohesion, combined with the degree to which the state maintains an external united front.

Accordingly, the paper argues that small-state theories need to be broadened in order to explain fully the ability of small states to make their voice heard in international organizations such as the EU.

The power of perception

The Nordic EU members, Sweden, Denmark and Finland, have a long experience of environmental protection on their own territory and a thorough knowledge of various environmental problems such as air and water pollution and hazardous chemicals (Lieverink and Andersen in Jordan 2005; Knill and Liefferink 2007; McCormick 2001). Furthermore, these states have had strict, and often very ambitious, national environmental legislation since the 1970s and (especially Sweden) been active in the international arena, in environmental politics, in conflict prevention and development aid (Ingebritsen 2006; Miles 2000; Hansen and Wæver 2002; Arter 2000). These factors have affected their *perceptual size*, which is the first subjective size factor of the conceptual framework used in this analysis. The perceptual size of the Nordic states has been affected in the sense that both domestic and international actors perceive these states' external capacity to influence international environmental politics as being greater than quantitative/objective size factors, such as their population size, would suggest (Thorhallsson 2006).

More precisely, Sweden, Denmark and Finland are considered, both by almost all of the Nordic officials interviewed and also by a large majority of the non-Nordic interviewees, to be front-runners, norm-setters and/or even role models for others to follow in environmental politics. The Nordic EU members are deemed by most of the interviewees to have influenced the environmental policy of the EU to a greater extent than is accounted for by their voting power in the Council of Ministers due to their expert knowledge, stringent domestic environmental legislation and international eco-activism (Nordic and non-Nordic permanent representatives and Commission officials 2005-2009, Ingebritsen 2002; Kronsell 2002). Consequently, we claim that the Nordic members' self-perception and the perception of other actors have been determining interlinked factors in the Nordic member states' ability to influence, and even take the lead within the EU's environmental policy. A strong self-image or self-perception in environmental matters has given the Nordic EU members confidence

to engage in international environmental politics and even to take the lead in this field, where other actors might initially have regarded them as small states with limited competence to act (Thorhallsson 2006).

As a result, these activities, based on the Nordic states' strong self-perception, have heightened their international image, and consequently how other actors perceive their external capacity in environmental matters (Nordic ministerial officials and permanent representatives, as well as non-Nordic permanent representatives, Commission officials and officials at the European Environment Agency 2005-09, see also Ingebritsen 2006; Lindholm 2002; Liefferink and Andersen 2005). This trend has been seen in other policy areas in the post-war period, where the Nordic states themselves have been confident enough to engage in various international activities and have even felt obliged to undertake considerable responsibility in international politics, such as in peace-keeping during the cold war, regardless of other actors' initial perception of their abilities to influence world politics (Thorhallsson 2006).

When it comes to the perceptual size of the Nordic EU members, Sweden appears to hold the highest external capacity of the Nordic member states. Swedish officials and experts and those from other member states involved in EU environmental policy-making, as well as officials of the Commission, perceive Sweden as the most influential of the three Nordic member states within the EU's environmental policy and often as the leader of the three states in question in this context (Nordic and non-Nordic permanent representatives, Nordic ministerial officials and Commission officials 2005-2009). Swedish officials involved in the EU's environmental policy are confident and describe Sweden as a respected expert and an example-setter that has no trouble making its voice heard regarding environmental policy despite its smallness. When asked if Sweden's image is of any importance regarding environmental policy and, consequently, how other actors perceive Sweden in environmental politics, the majority of the Swedish interviewees believe that Sweden's image, based on its expert knowledge and national legislation, is one of the most important power resources for Sweden in this policy area. They also claim that the Swedish image has made Sweden a more influential actor in the environmental policy than can be accounted for in terms of its population size. Other actors, including both officials from the Commission and from the other member states, support this view and perceive Sweden as an experienced player, with good knowledge in environmental policy-making, that has much more influence on the Commission's legislative proposals within the environmental policy than its population size would suggest (Nordic and non-Nordic permanent representatives and Commission officials 2005-09, see also Liefferink and Andersen in Jordan 2005).

Several examples of Sweden's success in influencing the EU's Environmental Policy can be mentioned in which perceptual size is to be seen as an explanatory factor (Nordic ministerial officials and permanent representatives as well as non-Nordic permanent representatives and Commission officials 2005-09). One is e.g. the EU's common acidification policy, where Swedish policy-makers perceived Sweden as having the external capacity (due to its expert knowledge, experience and national

acidification legislation) to convince the Commission and the other member states of the need for a common acidification policy, despite the fact that acidification only affects a small number of the member states, primarily Sweden, Finland and Germany (McCormick 2001). When Sweden first approached the Commission, shortly after its accession to the EU in 1995, the Commission argued that there was no room for new legislation in the Environmental Policy. Still, Sweden actively tried to convince the Commission of the relevance of the Swedish idea by stressing its experience, expert knowledge and national legislation in relation to acidification. In 1995, for example, Sweden appointed a national expert to work on acidification strategy at the EU level. The national expert in question was also the head of Secretariat for Acidification in Gothenburg, 'an organization with extensive involvement, high standing, and ample international experience of the problem of acid rain' (Kronsell 2002, see also Miles 2000). The result was that Sweden managed to 'open the eyes' of the Commission to the fact that acidification was a problem which needed to be dealt with at the EU level and a European acidification strategy was necessary in order to do so. The Commission put forward a proposal for an acidification strategy in 1997, based on Swedish national legislation (Swedish ministerial official, non-Nordic permanent representatives and Commission officials 2005-09 see also Kronsell 2002). The acidification strategy led to several air quality directives such as; the National Emission Ceiling Directive in 1999 and the Large Combustion Plant Directive in 2000 (Knill and Liefferink 2007; Kronsell 2002). Both these directives are of great importance to Sweden since their target is to fight pollutants that are believed to be associated with acidification (McCormick 2001, Kronsell 2002).

Denmark is also perceived, both by most of the Danish interviewees and a large majority of non-Danish actors, to have more influence on the environmental policy of the EU than its population size would suggest, due to its expert knowledge, long experience and strict environmental legislation (Danish permanent representatives, Swedish, Finnish and non-Nordic permanent representatives and Commission officials 2005-09). Denmark's perceptual size and external capacity in international environmental policy-making is therefore to be considered larger than its fixed size (which refers to its population and territorial size). However, neither Denmark nor Finland is considered to be as influential an actor as Sweden and one could argue that the reason is to be found in quantitative factors, since Sweden has a larger population, a slightly larger permanent representation in Brussels and 3 more votes in the Council of Ministers. Still, we argue that such an argument is an oversimplification, neglecting more important explanatory factors than the different population sizes of the Nordic states. When comparing the perceptual size of the Nordic EU members, one should not focus on the differences in their fixed size, i.e. their population size, but rather on what factors have formed their self-perception and other actors' perception of them. First, we need to take into consideration the fact that Sweden has in general been more of a "transnational activist" than Denmark and Finland for the past 35 years, e.g. in peace-keeping, international mediation and environmental issues (Ingebritsen 2006). Denmark and Finland have not been as eager as has Sweden to export their

ideas and norms, thereby acting as global agenda-setters. This has most likely affected how other actors perceive Denmark and Finland in environmental policy-making in comparison to Sweden in the sense that other actors do not perceive Denmark and Finland as having the same level of action competence as Sweden in international environmental policy-making (Egeberg 2005; Hansen and Wæver 2002; Ingebritsen 2002). This has, without a doubt, given Sweden a head start over Denmark and Finland, which have not developed an equally established image in the international arena. In addition, Denmark's perceptual size in environmental politics was negatively affected by the change of government in 2001, since the current liberal-led government is perceived, both by Danish officials and by officials from other member states and by the Commission, as not being as environmentally ambitious as its predecessor and Denmark is seen as not being as progressive regarding the EU's environmental policy as it was in the 1990s (Danish ministerial official, Danish, Swedish, Finnish and non-Nordic permanent representatives as well as Commission officials 2005-09, see also Liefferink and Andersen 2005; Andersen and Liefferink 1997). This will be discussed in detail in the next section, where the preference size of the Nordic states is explored; it is mentioned here to emphasise the linkage between self-perception and the perception of others. Still, Danish actors, the Commission and other member states perceive Denmark as having a considerably higher external capacity to influence international environmental politics than its fixed size would suggest, due to its expert knowledge, experience and strict national legislation, e.g., in waste management, recycling and air and chemical safety policies. These contributing factors have sometimes given Denmark the confidence to fight vigorously for its environmental goals in the EU's Environmental Policy, which has, for example, entailed convincing the Commission or even the European Court of Justice that Denmark should be allowed to keep its strict national environmental standards instead of having to lower its standards in accordance with EC law (Knill and Liefferink 2007; Vogel 1995). An example of this was the 'Danish bottle case' in the 1980s, when Denmark was brought to the European Court of Justice for restricting the import of beverages in non-recyclable containers to protect its advanced recycling system.

In brief, the ECJ took note of Danish experts' arguments and Denmark's experience in recycling, and concurred with Denmark that the protection of the Danish natural environment and public health outweighed the principles of the free flow of goods on the internal market. The ECJ therefore ruled in Denmark's favour, despite the fact that the Danish recycling system restricted the import of foreign beverage containers, which could not be recycled in the Danish system (Vogel 1995). The Danish bottle case is a good example of Denmark's perceptual size and its external capacity to have a say and defend its interests within the EU to a much greater extent than its fixed size would suggest. The same goes for several other cases within the environmental policy of the EU (such as the Urban Wastewater Directive and the Directive on Small Car Emissions) where Denmark was able to "punch above its weight". In these cases, Denmark was perceived both by Danish and other actors as having the external capacity to influence and even take the lead in EU environmental

policy-making due to its expert knowledge and prior experience in environmental issues such as waste management and water and air protection (Danish ministerial official, Danish, Swedish, Finnish and non-Nordic permanent representatives as well as Commission officials 2005-09, see also Knill and Liefferink 2007; Andersen and Liefferink 1997).

When examining Finnish activities within the environmental policy of the EU, we also need to take factors other than quantitative size factors into consideration, since Finland is, according to a large majority of the interviewees, also perceived as having far more influence here than its (population) size would suggest (Finnish ministerial officials and permanent representatives, non-Finnish permanent representatives as well as Commission officials 2005-09). Finland's perceptual size and thus its external capacity to influence this policy is thus considerably larger than its fixed size. The launching of the Northern Dimension Project (NDP) in 2000 is a good example of Finland's considerable action competence in environmental issues (Finnish ministerial officials, Finnish, Danish and Swedish, non-Nordic permanent representatives as well as Commission officials, see also:

<http://virtual.finland.fi/finfo/english/northdim2.html> or Arter 2000).

The NDP was launched as a part of the EU's external and cross-border policies. One of its main goals was to establish a close relationship between EU and Russia in order to increase prosperity, strengthen security and resolutely combat dangers such as environmental pollution, nuclear risks and cross-border crime stemming from Russia (Tallberg 2006; Arter 2000). The project has proved to be Finland's most important and successful initiative so far and has been taken as an example of a small state's success with a big idea (Tallberg 2006; Brown 2000). Finland perceived itself as an expert in relation to problems stemming from Russia with the external capacity to convince the Commission and the other member states of the need for a common policy such as the NDP. Finland therefore had the confidence to present the idea of the NDP, despite the fact that the Southern member states objected to such a project since they feared that the NDP would draw both attention and funding away from the 'Mediterranean program', which was intended to increase stability and security in Southern Europe (Finnish ministerial officials and permanent representatives 2005-07, non-Nordic permanent representatives as well as Commission officials 2005-09, see also Tallberg 2006). Prior to the launching of NDP, other actors might have seen Finland as a low-profile state with very limited action competence. The successful launching of the NDP in 2000 changed this perception of Finland, highlighting its image as an influential actor in EU policy-making that was able to influence policy to a greater extent than its fixed size would suggest (non-Nordic permanent representatives and Commission officials 2005-09).

Summing up the importance of the self-perception and other actors' perception of the Nordic EU members, we argue that perceptual size is a more valuable explanatory factor than quantitative/objective size factors in explaining their behaviour and performance regarding the EU's environmental policy. The Nordic states have been able to influence this policy to a greater extent than their population size would indicate and they are

perceived by Nordic officials, officials from other member states and Commission officials as being front-runners, experts and example-setters in environmental politics. This image, or perception, has been a valuable power resource for the Nordic member states since it has given them confidence to make their voice heard and enabled them to convince others of the relevance of their views and ideas within the Environmental Policy.

Diversity in domestic and international preferences: How can states influence the EU agenda?

We also need to examine the Nordic states' environmental ambitions and prioritizations and ideas about their role in the international arena in order to obtain a comprehensive picture of their performance and influence within the EU. These factors, i.e. the ambitions and prioritization of domestic political actors, and their ideas about the international system, form our second subjective size factor, *preference size* (Thorhallsson 2006). Sweden, Denmark and Finland have similar domestic ambitions in environmental issues, all having placed environmental issues high on their domestic political agenda and all having set ambitious domestic legislation and goals regarding environmental protection (Andersen and Liefferink 1997; Lindholm 2002; Kronsell 2002; Jordan 2005; Knill and Liefferink 2007). Consequently, we can say that Sweden, Denmark and Finland have similar internal capacities in the preference size category, even though the general public consensus on the importance of domestic environmental protection appears to be slightly higher in Sweden than in Denmark and Finland; this is due to the long period of social democratic government in Sweden (1933-76), which saw environmental protection as an essential part of the Swedish welfare model (Kronsell 1997; Ingebritsen 2006; Miles 2000).

However, states' domestic and international ambitions can differ widely (Thorhallsson 2006). This is evident in the case of Denmark and Finland, which do not have the same external capacity, i.e. their environmental goals and preferences on the international arena are not quite as high as they are at home. Danish decision-makers appear to have taken a rather reactive role regarding the environmental policy of the EU. Their main aim appears to have been to defend Danish environmental legislation by opposing legislative proposals that would mean that Denmark would have to lower its standards. Hence, Denmark does not tend to initiate new environmental legislation at the EU level in the way that Sweden has done (Thorsen 2001; Andersen and Liefferink 2005; Knill and Liefferink 2007). The change of government in Denmark in 2001 also appears to have lowered Denmark's ambitions and goals within the EU's environmental policy: both many Danish interviewees and several environmental attachées from other member states, as well as several Commission officials, claim that Denmark used to be more proactive and ambitious within the EU's environmental policy (Magnusdottir 2009).

Finland's ambitions and goals regarding the EU's environmental policy can also be considered lower than its domestic ambitions, and Finland is said to speak within the EU only when vital national interests are at stake (Finnish ministerial officials, Finnish

and non-Finnish permanent representatives 2005-09). Still, evidence can easily be found which demonstrates that Denmark and Finland have had higher goals and ambitions in international environmental politics than their fixed size indicates, even though their international goals are not at the same level as their domestic environmental ambitions. The Northern Dimension Project is a good example of Finnish international ambitions and goals; Denmark's goal to complete the enlargement negotiations during its Council Presidency term in 2002, where vital environmental interests were at stake, is an illustrative example of high international ambitions of small states with limited resources (Magnusdottir 2009, Friis 2003, Ingebritsen 2006; Tallberg 2006).

On the other hand, there is no doubt that Swedish policy-makers have held the highest ambitions, prioritizations and ideas about their state's role in international environmental politics, ambitions which do not differ as widely from their domestic goals as do those of the Finnish and Danish political elites. When Sweden was negotiating membership of the European Union, it had high expectations regarding its contributions to the EU, e.g. in terms of environmental protection, gender equality and labour rights. Sweden not only wanted to defend its strict environmental legislation on entering the EU, but was eager to up-load its environmental legislation to the EU level. This was evident, for example, in chemical politics (Swedish ministerial official and Swedish permanent representatives 2005, see also Kronsell 2001). Sweden had stricter rules regarding chemicals when it joined the EU and had derogations included in the accession treaty that allowed it to maintain its standards in chemical politics until 2000. During this period, the EU was to review its standards on chemicals; it was here that Swedish policy-makers had high ambitions of up-loading Swedish chemical legislation to the EU level instead of having to down-load less stringent legislation from the EU. The review of the chemical standards was a success for Sweden, since its standards were adopted on the EU level, and not the other way around, as Swedish opponents of EU membership had feared (Swedish ministerial official, Swedish permanent representative 2005, Kronsell 2001). However, it should be noted that Swedish policy-makers have sometimes, and especially in the first years of the EU membership, been unrealistic in their goals and their judgement concerning Sweden's external capacity to influence EU policy-making (Thorhallsson 2006). An experienced high-ranking Swedish official describes the situation as follows: "Swedish politicians have become more practical and realistic when it comes to EU negotiations. When we became EU members, both ministers and officials thought that Sweden was much better than the rest of the world and felt that we did not need the EU, but this attitude has changed. We have had good environmental ministers who have seen that the Environmental Policy of the EU is generally pretty ambitious, and globally the EU is a leader in environmental matters" (Swedish ministerial official 2005). Still, Sweden's environmental goals and preferences within the EU have continued to be higher than one would expect judging from its fixed size. Like Denmark and Finland, Sweden has also continued to influence the EU's environmental policy to a greater extent than can be expected from its population size. The Nordic members have all

been eager promoters of stricter chemical standards on the EU level, and their efforts have now resulted in the creation of a holistic framework for chemicals called REACH, which tightens restrictions on the production and use of hazardous chemicals (http://www.kemi.se/templates/Page_4676.aspx, see also Knill and Liefferink 2007, Magnúsdóttir 2009/2010).

In sum, Sweden, Denmark and Finland all have high internal capacity when it comes to preference size as they have all placed environmental issues high on their domestic political agenda and all have set themselves ambitious domestic legislation and goals regarding environmental protection. Sweden appears to have somewhat higher external capacity than the other two states when it comes to preference size. It has been the most proactive of the three Nordic states in the EU and is the most likely to promote its ideas within the EU's Environmental Policy. From a realist standpoint, one could argue that quantitative size factors, such as Sweden's population size, administrative size and its number of votes in the Council (in comparison to Denmark and Finland) explain its goals and behaviour regarding the EU's Environmental Policy. We, however, claim that one should rather seek the explanation in the causal linkage between states' perception size and preference size. Sweden has a somewhat larger perceptual size than Denmark and Finland; thus it is perceived as the most influential of these three states and the leader of the Nordic states regarding the EU's Environmental Policy. This self-perception on the part of Swedish officials, coupled with a similar perception by officials from other member states, has affected Sweden's preference size in the sense that its favourable image in environmental matters has given it the confidence to set ambitious goals and preferences and to place itself as an important actor regarding the EU's Environmental Policy.

The importance of domestic cohesion and administrative competence

When exploring the Nordic member states' influence and agenda-setting scope within the EU, we also need to establish their *political size*, which is the third subjective size factor in the conceptual framework in which the Nordic states are placed. The political size factor actually includes three sub-factors of which only the two latter ones are deemed relevant for the study. The first sub-factor is an objective factor focusing on state's military capability; the second and third sub-factors are subjective factors focusing on administrative capability and domestic cohesion. Administrative capability refers to the strength of the central administration, i.e. in running the state and negotiating on the international arena. Domestic cohesion refers to a state's ability to demonstrate a united front internationally (Thorhallsson 2006).

The Nordic states are all considered as having well-functioning and efficient administrations capable of managing their domestic affairs (Nordic ministerial officials, Nordic and non-Nordic permanent representatives and Commission officials 2005-09, see also Hanf and Soetendorp 1998; Thorhallsson 2000; Lægheid *et al.* 2004). Consequently, the internal capacity of the Nordic administrations is high, with considerable

action competence and relatively low vulnerability. However, we are mostly interested in the Nordic administrations' external capacity and their ability to project a unified national front or domestic cohesion on the EU level. The external capacities of the Nordic administrations and their levels of domestic cohesion are important for formulating and coordinating national interests that are to be promoted at the EU level. Accordingly, these factors provide further indications of the Nordic states' scope for agenda-setting within the EU (Thorhallsson 2000; Hanf and Soetendorp 1998; Hocking and Spence 2005; Kronsell 2002).

The size of the Nordic administrations (i.e. their civil servant complements, and particularly the numbers involved in environmental policy-making) is the first factor explored when assessing the external administrative capability of the Nordic member states. In 2007, the Danish, Swedish and the Finnish environmental ministries had about 70, 170 and 300 employees, respectively. In comparison, the French and the German environmental ministries had about 1,900 and 830 employees, respectively. The environmental section of the Dutch ministry responsible for environmental policy had over 500 employees (Magnusdottir 2009/2010). Nordic officials involved in the EU's Environmental Policy claim that this limited number of officials puts a heavy burden on them in comparison with their colleagues from large member states. Environmental attachés from the larger member states have more support from back home and can focus on one particular topic within the Environmental Policy, while each of the Nordic environmental attachés has to cover many areas within the Environmental Policy with less advice and support from their domestic administrations (Nordic ministerial officials and Nordic permanent representatives 2005-09, Thorhallsson 2000). As a result, it can be argued that the limited number of Nordic civil servants has some negative effect on the external capacity of the Nordic administrations in environmental policy-making on the EU level, at least from the standpoint of the Nordic negotiators themselves. Despite these size-related disadvantages, some characteristics of the Nordic administrations can increase their political size. These are adaptability, ready accessibility to high-ranking officials/ministers and easy co-ordination. They are traditionally considered the hallmarks of small administrations, but can also be considered defining as characteristics of the Nordic administrative model (Thorhallsson 2000; Randma-Liiv 2002; Bengtsson 2001). The smallness and administrative culture of the Nordic administrations makes them flexible and capable of adjusting quickly to change, which can be important in the fast pace of EU negotiations. Easy access to high-ranking officials, and even ministers, when quick responses and guidance are needed, and the transparency of the Nordic governance culture, are factors which can to some extent compensate for the lack of visible support that the Nordic environmental attachés sometimes experience (Randma-Liiv 2002; Thorhallsson 2000). Easy co-ordination between the relevant administrative units and the ministries involved in environmental policy-making facilitates the formation of a united front in environmental matters, and thereby strengthens domestic cohesion.

Non-Nordic officials involved in the EU's Environmental Policy claim that their Nordic colleagues appear to be thoroughly prepared and well-informed. They are also considered to be able to cope successfully with their task, which indicates that the

Nordic administrations have considerable external capacity, regardless of their small size (non-Nordic permanent representatives and Commission officials 2005-2009). Support for this claim can also be found in the Nordic members' performance at the helm of the Council Presidency.

The Nordic member states have all been highly praised for running successful Council Presidencies (Elgström 2003; Tallberg 2006; Friis 2003; see also Magnúsdóttir 2009). Running the Council Presidency requires not only mediating skills but also considerable administrative capacity (Tallberg 2001; see also, e.g. Elgström 2003). The Council Presidency is an administrative managing and co-ordinating unit, organizing meetings, both formal and informal, at various levels of Council negotiations (Elgström 2003; Bunse 2006). The Council Presidency is also to be considered an agenda-setter, or at least agenda-shaper, since it has the power to put certain topics on the Council's agenda or at least move topics higher or lower on the Council's agenda. The Nordic states have all used strategic agenda-setting when at the helm of the Council Presidency to promote their environmental interests. Timing and framing are the most vital factors for successful agenda-setting when running the Council Presidency. The promotion of national interests during tenancy of the Council Presidency is not likely to be successful if they have not been introduced in the pre-Presidency period and framed as common European interests. This requires thorough administrative preparation in the pre-Presidency period and an established relationship between the national administration and the Commission.

Finland's Northern Dimension Project is a good example of how Finland was able to use its Council Presidency term in 1999 to promote its national interests. It had used its pre-Presidency term for extensive administrative preparations, introducing the idea of the NDP on various occasions, and was able to frame it as a common European interest. During its tenancy of the Council Presidency, Finland put the NDP high on its agenda and the result was that the project was launched under the succeeding Portuguese Presidency in 2000. Yet the Finnish Council Presidency was never accused of promoting national interests: it was considered an exceptionally well-organized and successful Council Presidency (Tallberg 2006; Tiiilikainen 2003; Arter 2000), which illustrates its external administrative capability.

The Council Presidency also represents the Council, both externally in international negotiations and internally in its relations with other EU institutions. This puts a considerable burden on the national administration in charge of the Council Presidency. However, this representative role is also to be seen as a valuable opportunity for the state at the helm, since the Council is supposed to speak with one voice in international negotiations. That one voice comes from the Presidency (Bengtsson 2003). The conclusion of the enlargement negotiations under the Danish Presidency in 2002 is a solid example of how the Danish Presidency succeeded in its role as an external representative and as promoter of Danish environmental interests. It also demonstrates the considerable external capacity of the Danish administration. The conclusion of the enlargement negotiations involved Danish environmental interests, since Denmark had for years been affected by trans-boundary pollution stemming from its Eastern

neighbours (Pedersen 2003). It was therefore crucial for Denmark that its Eastern neighbours would, on accession to the EU, be subjected to stringent EU environmental legislation. The result was that Eastern European countries' environmental standards were raised dramatically with EU membership and trans-boundary pollution and the risk of environmental accidents diminished (Andersen and Liefferink 1997; Pedersen 2003; see also Friis 2003, Miles 2003).

Domestic cohesion is the second subjective sub-factor included in a state's political size (Thorhallsson 2006). A united national position, or domestic cohesion, is a significant factor of a state's political size. Firstly, it can be argued that disunion in a state's national position is likely to weaken its bargaining position and credibility. Secondly, negotiators in Brussels are also more likely to succeed if their national position in a given topic is clear and well co-ordinated. Nordic officials involved in environmental policy-making claim that their administrations are always able to co-ordinate between relevant ministries and/or administrative units involved in domestic environmental policy-making. Consequently, their states always have a clear national standpoint on all topics within the Environmental Policy. This is obviously of great importance to Nordic negotiators, who have less support from their domestic administration than their colleagues from the larger member states when negotiating within the Environmental Policy. Non-Nordic officials also claim that a unified national position is of great importance in negotiations within the Environmental Policy. Moreover, they claim that the Nordic EU members almost always have a clear unified national position to present, unlike states such as Germany, Italy and Greece (non-Nordic permanent representatives 2005-09).

Another feature that facilitates the domestic cohesion of the Nordic states in environmental matters is the general consensus, among both political parties and the Nordic public, on the importance of environmental protection (Magnusdottir 2009, Thorhallsson 2006, Ingebritsen 2006). Changes of government in the Nordic states are not likely to change their national standpoints drastically regarding environmental politics (Thorhallsson 2006). The change of government in Denmark in 2001 had negative effects on the Danish image, as is stated earlier in this article, since the liberal-led government was considered less ambitious in international environmental policy-making than its predecessor. Still, the change did not alter the general Danish standpoint regarding environmental politics, even though its goals may be more moderate than they were in the 1990s. Thus, the Nordic states have high external capacity when it comes to domestic cohesion, since they are almost always able to present a united national front in environmental issues.

Reflecting on the political size of the Nordic states, it can be said that domestic cohesion and certain characteristics of the administrations have increased the administrative capacity of the Nordic member states within EU decision-making. Hence, the Nordic states have been able to compensate for the smallness of their administrations, seen in terms of staff numbers. Accordingly, they are not only able to cope with the burden of EU membership; they are able to set the agenda regarding the EU's Environmental Policy.

Conclusion

The paper has examined the ability of Sweden, Finland and Denmark to have a say and take a lead in the decision-making process on the EU's Environmental Policy. Furthermore, the paper has demonstrated that qualitative/subjective size factors of our conceptual framework (perceptual, preference and political size) give a more comprehensive picture of the ability of the Nordic EU member states to influence and set the agenda regarding the Union's Environmental Policy than do the quantitative/objective factors that have traditionally been used to determine states' size and influence, such as their populations.

According to Nordic officials, officials from other member states and Commission officials, the Nordic member states are perceived as being able to influence the EU's Environmental Policy to a greater extent than objective factors such as their population size would indicate. Explanations for their success within the EU's Environmental Policy are to be found in subjective factors such as their image as environmental experts, emphasizing high environmental standards, ambitions and prioritization.

Furthermore, their domestic consensus and united external front, with environmental protection and standards high on the political agenda, are important contributory factors to their success in the EU. These features, along with the states' public administrative competence, characterized by the typical features of small administrations, compensate for their more limited administrative capacity compared to large EU member states. Accordingly, the Nordic states are seen as front-runners, experts and example-setters within the EU's Environmental Policy.

Traditional quantitative measures normally defining the size of states, such as their population, territorial size, GDP and military strength, do not give a clear picture of the Nordic states' role or effectiveness within the EU. Sweden's population size, administrative size and its number of votes in the Council (in comparison to Denmark and Finland) do not fully explain its status as the most influential actor of the Nordic EU members in environmental issues. Explanations derived from the subjective size factors, which focus on in the causal linkage between states' perception size and preference size, need to be taken into consideration. Accordingly a broad conceptual framework, including subjective factors, is needed in order fully to explain small states' ability to have a say and take a lead in international organizations. How small states are able to exercise influence internationally is still largely an unexplored field. This is mainly because of the continuing focus on states' international capacity in terms of the traditional variables mentioned above. Theories in the field of international relations need to look beyond these features and explore qualitative variables, which may be better suited to explain small states' success or failure internationally.

Endnotes

- ¹ For a thorough outlining of the theoretical framework see Thorhallsson 2006.
- ² See Magnúsdóttir 2009.
- ³ Influence is here defined as a member state's ability to make its voice heard and successfully promote and/or protect its national interests within the EU.
- ⁴ The four potential power resources analyzed in the Ph. D. study were: 1) The use of a favourable image, 2) the use of the Council Presidency as an amplifier of national interests, 3) the potential of small national administrations and finally 4) the establishment and use of a close relationship with the Commission.
- ⁵ The criteria according to which the interviewees were selected included: the interviewees should preferably be middle-ranking officials, but not high-level diplomats such as ambassadors, since the former group was deemed less constrained by its status and more likely to speak freely and give candid answers to delicate questions. Secondly the interviewees should have held their current position for no less than six months before the interview. It was considered important that the interviewees had gained some experience in their current position, which they could be interviewed about.
- ⁶ The majority of the interviewees were environmental attachés or other officials at the Permanent Representations of 17 non-Nordic member states (see further information in reference list); approximately a quarter of the interviewees were Nordic environmental attachés. Furthermore, the interviews included officials at the DG Environment of the Commission, officials in the Nordic environmental and foreign ministries, officials in Nordic environmental agencies and officials at the European Environment Agency.

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Interviews with 47 anonymous officials in the years 2005-09 at:

- a) The permanent representations of the following states: Austria, Belgium, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Portugal, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, The Netherlands and The United Kingdom.
- b) The DG Environment of the Commission
- c) The Swedish, Danish and Finnish environmental and foreign ministries
- d) The European Environment Agency in Copenhagen

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