

Politics and diplomacy: The President of the European Council

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In 2014 when Mr Tusk was appointed as President of the European Council, the popular Prime Minister of Poland had the perfect profile for the job: A progressive, liberal and outspoken Eastern European leader, he was ideally placed for taking forward the European Union's (EU) agenda, and to bring visibility to the European Council as an institution. Internally, the EU was still grappling with the consequences of the Eurozone crisis years and a growing political fragmentation between and within the member states. Externally, the EU had to manoeuvre a number of volatile situations including its reaction to Russia's military intervention in Ukraine. Hence, Mr Tusk was chosen as the EU governments thought it important to bring political leadership and direction to the EU's most senior political body, and to send a clear signal about the liberal, democratic values of the Union.

Mr. Tusk was to succeed the European Council's inaugural president, former Belgian Prime Minister Herman van Rompuy, who had been in the job from 2010-2014; it was only with the implementation of the Lisbon Treaty in 2009 that the meetings of Heads of States and Governments became formally institutionalised into the EU's organisational structures. Hence, having just one person preceding him in the job, the role was still very much 'in the making' when Mr Tusk came into post.

Brokering vs leading

Mr Van Rompuy and Mr Tusk have approached the presidency very differently, and their differences in leadership reflect an inherent complexity in the job: The European Council President has to strike a delicate balance between taking political leadership for a shared European agenda, at the same time as appearing as a neutral broker between Heads of States and Governments of the member states. The difficulty lies in knowing *when* and *how* to be either the convenor or the political director for the governments; paraphrasing the words of a senior EU practitioner, 'the European Council presidency requires the appropriate persona for the appropriate crisis'.

For Van Rompuy, with his background in economics and the highly complex Belgian political system, the natural leadership style was always that of an understated, but very skilled and competent facilitator. Throughout the economic and financial Eurozone crisis years he worked tirelessly behind the scenes to coordinate and find compromise solutions between the European Central Bank, the heads of governments, and with the other EU institutions. He never sought the spotlight or media attention even when great successes had been achieved under difficult circumstances, but rather left the political presentations and 'wins' to the governments and spokespeople. This disinterest in public appearance and political posturing, and his strong focus on the issues on the table, made him well-respected by his colleagues at the most senior political level. The media, on the other hand, was much less impressed by Mr Van Rompuy's diplomatic skills and often characterised him as too weak and 'bureaucratic' for the role.

In contrast, Mr Tusk was seen by many as someone who would strengthen the connection to the public, and invigorate the political drive in the European Council. Playing to his strengths, the conditions were also rapidly changing when Mr Tusk took over the presidency in 2014 as the EU's priorities shifted away from the immediate crisis management of the Eurozone to a stronger focus and action in foreign policy. Russia had embarked on its military intervention in Ukraine only in February that same year, so tensions were high in the EU's immediate neighbourhood, as well as in global politics more broadly (Syria, Middle East, and Ebola crisis in Africa, to name but a few of the most pressing issues). It was against this changing political context, and with the endorsement from the other EU heads of government, that Mr. Tusk started the job with a clear intention to play an active, visible role and set the political direction for the EU's agenda.

As Mr Tusk after five years now hands over the presidency to his own successor, (another) Belgian Prime Minister Charles Michel, it seems fair to say that he has not been as successful as political agenda-setter as he had probably hoped. But that is not to suggest that his presidency has been unsuccessful; on the contrary, to many he has been a much-needed advocate at the most senior political level for progressive values at a time of illiberal political forces both within and outside of EU's borders. He has spoken out on several occasions regarding concerning developments in Hungary and his own country, Poland, while also making strong remarks on European solidarity when it comes to immigration and Brexit.

Nevertheless, after the two rounds of presidencies by Mr Van Rompuy and Mr Tusk it is now becoming apparent that the European Council President cannot take the bold, public leadership position that many – including Mr Tusk himself – assumed when he embarked on the job. The role, it is now clear, certainly requires political leadership and public flair, but in the current political climate the main task is the difficult issue of finding compromises and solutions between the governments. This responsibility has been further emphasised with the weakening of COREPER (the meeting of EU Ambassadors) in recent years, and the pronounced intergovernmental mode of governance across the EU in general. As a result, the European Council President is currently the most important actor when it comes to preparing consensus on highly political areas and finding spaces for compromise ahead of European Council summits. It has also become clear how fundamental to the success of the European Council Presidency the relationship with the European Commission really is. When the presidents of the two institutions work well together and connect their different power bases, they bring together different parts of the system and facilitate collaboration throughout all levels of decision-making. If they do not, the European Council President will find himself constrained in terms of resources and influence, and risk becoming merely a ceremonial figure for chairing the governments' meetings.

What comes next?

It is perhaps a sign of the political times that the incoming European Council President is another Belgian Prime Minister with a political career characterised by coalition building and multi-stakeholder (and even multi-lingual) politics. Also, Mr Charles Michel is known as a strong liberal and has already indicated the main priorities for his presidency to be transatlantic relations, trade and security issues. As such, his leadership – at this point in time – appear somewhere in between the profiles of his two predecessors as he often refers to the need for consensus building and the political agenda set by the governments collectively, but also calls for the EU to play its part at the

global stage, in economic and political terms. This will all quickly come to the test: As Mr Michel takes over from Mr Tusk on 1 December 2019, the immediate agenda is already packed with issues that go to the heart of the EU, including Brexit, the next EU budget for 2021–2027, and the fight against climate change.