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Who is leading the European Union?

Jean De Ruyt

The European Union will only be reconciled with its citizens when they will be able to identify leaders at the level of the institutions.

2014 witnessed an impressive changing of the guard at the top of the EU institutions: Jean Claude Juncker, the eternal prime minister of Luxemburg, was ‘elected’ as the head of the Commission; the European Council chose its president, Donald Tusk, from the new Member States; and Matteo Renzi’s success in the European elections allowed him to have Italy’s Foreign Minister Federica Mogherini appointed as the new High Representative.

In the meantime, two new conflicts developed in our neighbourhood: the war against the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq – which struck the Union at its core through several terrorist actions – and the crisis in Ukraine, which confirmed the imperial ambitions of Putin’s Russia and our weakness in countering them.

The EU also continued to suffer the consequences of austerity policies, the rise of Euroscepticism and a new crisis in Greece following the victory of Syriza in a national election. And, in a few months, an election in the United Kingdom threatens to shake its deepest foundations.

HOW DO WE DEAL WITH THESE CHALLENGES?

Does the new institutional setting put in place by the Lisbon Treaty give the institutions the tools to exert leadership and show the way ahead?

The answer at first glance is not very positive: the initiative for a war against the Islamic State originates from the United States and the efforts to stop the Ukraine crisis are centred for the moment in the ‘Normandy’ format – with Russia, Ukraine, France and Germany, but not the EU itself.

As for the economic crisis, national leaders continue to blame the EU, which makes it as difficult for the Commission to launch initiatives as it is for British politicians to convince their voters that their country should stay in the Union. And when it comes to solving the Greek debt problem, the direction continues to be dictated by Berlin, as it has been since the beginning of the Eurozone crisis.

One could argue it’s always been this way: since its beginnings as the European Economic Community, the Union was always led ‘from behind’ by its major Member States – with strong outside input from Washington in the security field.

But at the same time, step by step, more power has been given to the institutions and their leaders: since Maastricht, and with Jacques Delors as a model, the powers of the president of the Commission have increased from treaty to treaty; the High Representative, who had a modest mandate at the time of Javier Solana, has now replaced the rotating presidency in foreign policy and is a vice president of the Commission; and the added value of a permanent president for the European Council has been amply demonstrated in the last five years by Herman Van Rompuy.

The question is thus: is the current situation the end of the game or just a step in the development of ‘an ever-closer Union’? Will Member States gradually cease to lead the Union from behind? Will we, in a not so distant future, have a president of Europe modelled on the president of the United States?

It is obviously not possible to answer these questions now – just as it was not possible to believe in the 1980s that we would have a common currency by 2000. The negotiators of the Amsterdam Treaty would never have dared to sketch the profile of the triple-hatted High Representative, and when in 2004 Tony Blair vetoed the appointment of Guy Verhofstadt as president of the Commission, he probably did not anticipate that Barroso’s successor would be imposed on the European Council by the European Parliament.

Leadership at the level of the institutions may be developing but the pace is too slow for today’s growing challenges – and the expectations of EU citizens.

Indeed, when asked, many in Europe and in third countries seem to believe that the Union would work better if it had real leaders at the level of the institutions. Several

Eurobarometers during the Constitutional Treaty crisis confirmed this. And when the Lisbon Treaty entered into force, Tony Blair, one of the most prominent European leaders, was the clear candidate to become the first permanent European Council president.

However, when the time came for the Member States to choose, Tony Blair was not selected, and a US-style presidential election remains at best a distant prospect. Any suggestion that the president of the Commission should chair the European Council is seen by many in academic circles as a provocation.

WHY IS IT SO DIFFICULT TO DEVELOP REAL LEADERSHIP AT EU LEVEL?

The answer lies in the famous ‘inter-institutional balance’, one of the main foundations of the European construction. The compromise between an ever-closer Union and respect for national sovereignty was key to the success of the Communities and later of the EU. This compromise implied that supra-nationality would remain diffuse and under strict control, managed at distance in the Member States’ capitals – although notably only by a few.

The problem with this ‘leadership from behind’ is that it no longer sits well with current challenges. Contrary to Eurosceptics’ wishes, the Union has more responsibilities than ever. The common interests of EU citizens have become much more important than that which divides them – and European regulations are increasingly impacting the everyday lives of the people.

It is thus quite logical that people are suffering from being ruled by leaders they did not choose – or cannot well identify. This is one of the main reasons for the disenchantment of

EU citizens, regrettably confirmed by the recent European election results of 2014. To be more popular, the EU needs real leaders, but given its current unpopularity, citizens will not willingly deliver more power to its institutions.

HOW DO WE ESCAPE THIS VICIOUS CIRCLE?

The challenge for institutional leaders is to demonstrate daily their added value. They can only assert their authority if they can demonstrate that their actions allow the Union to function to greater effect. From that perspective, there is ample room for them to occupy the political playground.

Even in the 1980s, Delors was able to demonstrate the ‘added value’ of an institutional leader managing European Community affairs. The High Representative role was created to manage crises at our borders which could not be dealt with by the rotating presidency – or individual Member States. A permanent president of the European Council was, as mentioned, indispensable to managing the euro crisis.

The first task of the institutional leaders is to propose solutions to the Member States – something Delors excelled at. Their responsibility is to channel national initiatives, to bring positions closer to each other, to bring a lost sheep back into the fold – and save its face. Their success relies on consistency of promises and actions and close cooperation with leaders of the Member States and those of third countries.

The opacity of the decision-making process at the European level will remain. It comes from the complexity of the ‘institutional triangle’, which no one outside the Brussels inner circle can ever begin to understand. National leaders

usually only publicise what makes them look good – and tend to make the EU the scapegoat for their own weaknesses. Furthermore, most European MPs remain far too distant from those who voted for them.

The citizen should be able to better understand what is at stake: European institutional leaders need to be able to communicate directly and effectively with the citizens, in language they understand. But to be heard, they need to speak with the authority of someone taking responsibility for what they are saying.

WILL THE NEW LEADERS ACCELERATE THE PROCESS?

Doubts can be expressed about the legitimacy of the ‘Spitzenkandidaten’ procedure but the spring 2014 saga demonstrated that there is at least a real political will within EU political circles – and in parts of public opinion – to reinforce the power of the institutional leaders of the Union.

Jean Claude Juncker has thus a certain legitimacy in pretending that his Commission will be more political and his Commissioners more directly responsible for initiating and implementing the policies defined by the College – even if it is not yet clear if the double tier system he put in place will prevent precisely this from happening.

Juncker will probably take over most of the economic policy responsibilities that the European Council gave its own president at the time of Herman Van Rompuy, and Donald Tusk will increase the role of the president of the European Council in Foreign Policy. There are already clear signs of these changes.

It would in one sense re-establish orthodoxy with regard to the competences of the Commission, but if Tusk continues, as he has already begun, to take initiatives in foreign policy, it would also be a very broad interpretation of his foreign policy mandate as defined by the Treaty.

The new European Council president cannot be blamed for doing more than just ‘representing the Union at his level’ in Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) matters. He’s put his finger on a weakness in the Lisbon Treaty system: a crisis of a magnitude of the Ukraine is not managed by foreign ministers but by the heads of state and government. Mogherini, who according to the treaty is supposed to ‘conduct’ CFSP, cannot really interact at that level: her interlocutors are John Kerry and Sergei Lavrov, not Obama and Putin. At the top level, the EU can only offer the duo of the president of the Council and of the Commission and, for foreign policy issues, the president of the European Council – or Angela Merkel and François Hollande.

The most powerful current EU leader remained a rather unknown figure until the 2008 economic crisis: the president of the European Central Bank. Europe would not be what it is today if Mario Draghi had not exerted a more than convincing leadership at the head of the ECB. His advantage lies in the fact that he is supposed to be independent, but even when his independence was challenged, he was able to take decisions, to make those decisions acceptable and to explain them to the public. He is the best model for the argument I wish to make.

Federica Mogherini was greeted with scepticism when Matteo Renzi ‘imposed’ her as High Representative. But since then, she

has demonstrated her competence in foreign policy, and the diplomatic skills required to obtain the indispensable consensus of Member States for her initiatives.

This remains the most important consideration: as mentioned above, it is not for the current institutional actors to take over the competences of the Member States as they are exerted through the Council and the European Council – or at the national level. With the exception of instances when the Commission acts as a college for specific community matters, the institutional leaders can only assert their authority if there is consensus among the Member States. But it is also their task to shape this consensus – and to demonstrate that their actions allow the Union to function to greater effect.

Jean De Ruyt is a senior career diplomat, who has been ambassador of Belgium to the EU, the UN and NATO. Currently he is a Senior Policy Advisor for Covington & Burling in Brussels and he serves on the Board of McLarty Associates in Washington. He is also a visiting Professor at both Louvain University and the College of Europe in Natolin.

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EGMONT

Royal Institute for International Relations
Naamsestraat 69
1000 Brussels
BELGIUM

> www.egmontinstitute.be

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