

Despite attention focusing on Juncker's new Commission, the European Council will remain the real centre of EU decision-making

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*The appointment of Jean-Claude Juncker as the new President of the European Commission generated substantial media attention over the summer, which has continued during the Commissioner hearings held in the European Parliament. **Uwe Puetter** assesses how these developments sit alongside his theory of 'deliberative intergovernmentalism', under which the European Council is viewed as holding a central role in the EU's decision-making process. He argues that the appointments made in 2014 are largely in keeping with the new intergovernmental modes of decision-making which have emerged over the last two decades, and that far from attempting to undermine the European Council's role, Juncker can be expected to develop close co-operation between the European Council and the Commission.*



Almost exactly two years ago I wrote [here](#) about Europe's new [deliberative intergovernmentalism](#) and how the European Council had emerged as the novel centre of European Union politics. The argument was that the decentralised character of most of the EU's new areas of activity, such as economic governance and foreign and security policy, which have been established with or after the Maastricht Treaty, requires increased and ongoing efforts of high-level consensus-seeking in order to ensure that the EU is capable of acting collectively and decisively. This is especially the case when decisions have immediate consequences for domestic politics. Moreover, at the time the discussions about the management of the consequences of the euro crisis and related institutional reforms added to the publicity for the European Council.

Now the EU institutions have entered a new life-cycle with a newly elected European Parliament (EP), a new Commission and, indeed, a new full-time president of the European Council. If one traces the discussions and the media coverage of EU politics during the summer of 2014 from the EP elections until the public hearings of the members of the new Commission, the EP and the new president of the Commission Jean-Claude Juncker get all the attention.

The appointment of the Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk as the new president of the European Council barely made it into the headlines (except in Poland). Questions such as who would get the post of High Representative and the main economic and financial affairs portfolios were far more important. And then there was Juncker, the *Spitzenkandidat*, who was carried by an EP grand coalition through the appointment process. A manoeuvre, it seemed, which left little room for national governments in the European Council to agree on a different Commission president.

Was I wrong? Is the European Council no longer that important? Has consensus among Europe's top decision-makers become less relevant as the Commission is set to become more assertive under a new president with strong backing from the EP? I do not think so. My argument about the salience of the European Council in EU politics was not one about the irrelevance of the Commission, not to mention the ever more powerful EP. It rather pointed to the fact that the increasingly prominent new areas of EU activity rely on permanent European Council intervention as the Commission can play an important role in these domains, but is not mandated to orchestrate decisive policy action, for which however the need is increasingly felt.

The new intergovernmentalism in EU politics indeed requires us to rethink more profoundly the respective roles of individual EU institutions in old and new policy domains, as I have [recently argued](#) together with Chris Bickerton and

Dermot Hodson. In fact, the Commission has been largely in agreement with European Council leadership in the new areas of EU activity. Also the EP – though it has not shied away from vocal criticism of the role of national governments, for example in EU crisis management – is far from demanding a centralisation of economic governance under the authority of the Commission. Here, the partisan affiliation and nationality of individual MEPs largely imply similar positions to those held by their own respective member state government or opposition parties. Similarly, the EP claims its territory in the domain of EU foreign and security policy, yet the focus is on pushing EU member state governments to agree on collective action more quickly rather than on challenging governments' authority in these domains altogether.

This leads to the role of the new Commission president.

It is worth giving extra attention to his personal background. Jean-Claude Juncker has not only been the longest serving member of the European Council in history, he also acted as the first elected president of the powerful Eurogroup of euro area finance ministers for a period of almost ten years. In this position he was a defender rather than an opponent of the model of collective governance. He knows all too well about the EU's reliance on the generation of top-level political agreement. His efforts to tighten the leadership structure inside the new Commission are not in contradiction to an appreciation of the political role of the European Council. These attempts are in line with the presidentialisation of the Commission which occurred under José Manuel Barroso.

Juncker takes this process further as he knows that the Commission is closely watched from sceptical publics, the EP and, quite importantly, national governments. The model of a tightly managed Commission corresponds to the reality of close inter-institutional relations with the European Council. Like his predecessor, Juncker will be a key member of the European Council. He will make commitments to and strike deals with the heads of national governments. His ability to deliver on his own promises made within the European Council is directly linked to the question of the internal organisation of the Commission. Juncker will work towards close ties between the European Council and his administration not in spite of his intention to be a powerful Commission president, but because of it. He will accept European Council leadership, not run against it. He will seek to develop the Commission's new monitoring powers within the reformed economic governance architecture on the basis of European Council and Commission cooperation, not outside of it.

Moreover, the new European Council president, Donald Tusk, should soon emerge as a key figure on the Brussels' scene too. The fact that his appointment was less of a public issue than that of Juncker and the other members of the new Commission is largely owed to the behind-the-scenes role of the European Council president. Tusk's predecessor Herman Van Rompuy has cultivated this model. His ambition was to focus on the functioning of the European Council as a consensus generator and on inter-institutional relations, rather than on the pursuit of a particular political agenda.

What may appear as a weakness in EU politics, is in fact the most important aspect of the European Council presidency. Indeed, few have doubted that Van Rompuy has been assertive about how he fulfilled these functions. The discussion about the European Council presidency confirmed this interpretation of the role of the European Council president too. With Tusk and the Danish Prime Minister Helle Thorning-Schmidt, there were two lead candidates who were associated with two successfully led EU presidencies, known to be effective behind-the-scenes workers.



Donald Tusk and Jean-Claude Juncker, Credit: Jean-Claude Juncker (CC-BY-SA-3.0)

Finally, another detail slipped under the radar in the discussion about the EU's new top jobs. Tusk was also appointed as president of the Euro Summit – the euro area sub-division of the European Council. Until very recently such a decision was inconceivable – especially for France. The move not only shows conversion around the model of the European Council and Euro Summit presidency, established by Van Rompuy, but also formalises the role of the European Council as the most important EU institution when it comes to managing the EU's increased diversity – especially in policy domains which matter for domestic politics. Similarly, Tusk's appointment builds a much needed bridge between old and new member states: a move which gives more not less room for intensified and EU-wide policy coordination in economic governance and foreign affairs.

For a longer discussion of this topic, see Uwe Puetter's recent book, [The European Council and the Council. New intergovernmentalism and institutional change](#) (Oxford University Press, 2014)

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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