

Opinion **European Council**

Three qualities the next European Council leader needs

What the EU needs most of all is a functional collective decision maker of last resort

LUUK VAN MIDDELAAR



Herman Van Rompuy, a former Belgian prime minister and the first president of the European Council © AP

Luuk van Middelaar JUNE 26, 2019

After a [failed attempt](#) to fill the bloc's top jobs at their summit last week, EU leaders have given themselves an extension until June 30. Caught in a [conundrum](#) of geographical, political and gender balances, they risk losing sight of the personal qualities required.

It is true that in the selection process for the heads of the European Commission and the European Central Bank the qualifications of each candidate are scrutinised. (Just ask Manfred Weber, who was [all but eliminated](#) from the commission race for his lack of experience.) But hardly any attention is paid to the personal assets needed by the new European Council president, the third big job in the package.

This is a worrying oversight. Although the successor to Donald Tusk may have less personal influence on EU decisions than the new [Jean-Claude Juncker](#) or the next Mario Draghi, the role is nevertheless a vital one. The wrong candidate could condemn the EU to five years of deadlock and division.

Back in 2009, when the first permanent president of the European Council was appointed,

expectations ranged from high to low. Some thought the job should go to a well-known strider of the world stage, such as the former UK prime minister Tony Blair — someone capable of “[stopping the traffic in Beijing](#)”. Others downplayed the role as that of a mere convener and arranger of summit seating plans, thumb-twiddling between the four meetings per year that the EU Treaty foresees.

Events have proven both sides wrong. Since 2010, the European Council has emerged as the EU’s undisputed crisis manager, bringing together the bloc’s 28 presidents and prime ministers, the commission president and its own president. It fell to Germany’s Angela Merkel, Nicolas Sarkozy of France and their colleagues to tame the euro crisis. They alone had the authority to convince their parliaments and the public to agree to the big, urgent and divisive moves needed to save the euro.

In the crises Europe has faced since then — from the influx of refugees in 2015-2016 to the ongoing Brexit circus — people looked to the joint national leaders to set the direction of debate. In practice, the body now meets monthly. While the ECB has emerged as the EU’s “lender of last resort”, the European Council has established itself as its “decision maker of last resort”.

The new leader must therefore have three qualities. First and foremost, the ability to forge consensus behind the scenes. A council president has hardly any autonomous decision-making power but must bring all the other leaders on board. The best preparation for this modest but essential task is to have successfully led a multi-party coalition government at home. While leaders of one-party governments become expert at decision-making, those of multi-party governments are accustomed to negotiating. And the EU has a multi-nation government.

Second: he or she must be able to convince without arm-twisting. The council president needs a non-adversarial style; battering, pressuring and threatening do not work when it comes to getting 28 (for now) presidents and premiers, each with veto power, in line. Black belt judo skills matter far less than the skills of persuasion: winning trust, keeping promises and building relationships. While in office, the president must put ego aside and resist the temptation to seek personal gains and goals. Words should be few but carefully chosen, applying a gentle steer and appropriate firmness: the job involves summing up the council’s verdict, which then commits Brussels and 28 capitals.

The third essential ability is sound political judgment, in terms of both prudence and determination. The hardest call is when to apply the EU’s ultimate decision-making power and when not to. The EU treaty gives the chair the power to call a summit and set its agenda, tools to be used with care. It was only after 18 months in office that the council’s first president, Herman Van Rompuy, felt strong enough to set a summit date against the wishes of a reluctant German chancellor (Ms Merkel threatened not to come). When the council meddles too much in day-to-day EU business, it is criticised for obstruction. But if it stays aloof in times that call

for action and lets deadlock and division fester, it commits a worse political sin: irresponsibility.

All this is not to say that communication skills or diplomatic chutzpah are irrelevant, but other actors can display those talents. What the EU needs most of all these days is a functional collective decision maker of last resort. Only the right council president can give it that.

The treaty puts this job alone squarely in the European Council's hands. If the leaders' get this nomination wrong, they'll have only themselves to blame.

The writer, a former chief speech writer to European Council president Herman Van Rompuy, is the author of 'Alarums and Excursions: Improvising politics on the European Stage'

Copyright The Financial Times Limited 2019. All rights reserved.