

**Speech for the**  
**European Parliament 5.5.2015**

**The Role of the President of the European Council**

Thank you for your invitation to speak to you here today. It is clear that the function of first permanent President of the European Council has captured your imagination more than my previous position as the 49th Prime Minister of Belgium! I consider it as an honour to be here - although you could also see it as a test, albeit not one on which I will be marked!

You all know what the President of the European Council's specific functions are, as they are assigned by the Lisbon Treaty. As President, I was also aware of what was not provided for in the Treaty and what was needed. What was not formally provided, I tried to organise informally. My obsession, my 'Leitmotiv' was cooperation. That is why I took the initiative of seeing the President of the Commission on a weekly basis and the President of the Parliament every month. I would have also liked to have held regular meetings with the President of the Eurogroup and of the European Central Bank from the outset of my mandate. However, I discovered that the enthusiasm for such contact was not mutual. This is why I included a provision in the treaty known as the fiscal compact, whereby 'institutional actors' would meet once a month. This proved very useful in helping to find a solution to the Cyprus problem in April 2013.

The EU institutions are not, and must not be, rivals. We have a common cause, particularly in difficult times — all the more so during such existential crises as we had to face between 2010 and 2013.

The Lisbon Treaty maintained the rotating Presidency of the Council, leading some to fear a duplication of roles between it and the new European Council. In practice, the rotating Presidency has become instrumental to the achievement of the European Council's aims: it implements the overall strategy defined by the European Council and organises its legislative work. There is no such thing any more as a 'six-month presidency programme'. My staff and I enjoyed excellent relations with ten (10) rotating presidencies, all of which worked in the spirit of the Lisbon Treaty. Formally, there was no hierarchy between the European Council and the Council and in practice, the European Council took the lead.

It was a wise decision to have the European Council President fulfil the role of Euro summit President. While not so easy if the President of the European Council belongs to a non-euro area Member State, having a single President is important. It avoids the rivalry which could otherwise develop along the many interfaces between the 28 Member States and the 19 euro-area Member States. Measures targeting the euro area can have an impact on the common market and - more importantly - legislation is always a Community matter. The intergovernmental Treaty on Stability, Coordination and Governance (known as the TSCG or the Fiscal Compact Treaty) is an exception to this rule.

While I said it was wise to have one person fulfil both roles, this was not self-evident in 2010 when I started to chair the Euro summits - and the rearguard was present, as ever.

The relationship with the European Parliament is very special. The President of the European Council is not accountable to Parliament. However he does have a general obligation to report after each European Council meetings. I made a point of informing Parliament after most informal meetings of the European Council and at one stage suggested debriefing the Conference of Presidents a few hours after each European Council. However, due to lack of sufficient interest in meetings of this kind, they took place on only three or four occasions. While I systematically refused to be heard formally by Parliament's committees, because to do so would give the impression that the President of the European Council was accountable to Parliament, I generally accepted requests for informal contacts with presidents of committees, members, rapporteurs and others. In preparation for the European budget many consultative meetings took place, though I was ever careful to avoid the trap of entering negotiations ahead of European Council meetings. During my five years as President, I enjoyed good and open relations with the President of the Parliament. I know that the European Parliament wants a full participation of its president in the EC. There are no precedents at a national level.

The European Council cannot function properly without the Commission. I was lucky enough to have very close relationships with the President of the Commission and with individual commissioners. Of course, each of the institutions has its own role as defined by the Treaty but I have always preferred cooperation to discussions about methodologies for cooperating. And we had to cooperate - because we had a common cause. Much was at stake and we were all acutely aware of our collective historical responsibility.

Paradoxically, the European Council - which is considered to be an intergovernmental body - has actually strengthened the role of the Commission and of the European Central Bank, both of which are incarnations of the 'community method', and fiscal and budgetary surveillance powers are now attributed to the Commission, which would have been unthinkable before the crisis.

The intergovernmental initiatives - the European Stability Mechanism and the Fiscal Compact Treaty - were not a 'power grab' but were the unavoidable result of a lack of financial means in the EU budget and an absence of unanimity in the European Council. There was no attempt to shift the balance of power in the Union.

The European Council asked the President of the European Council to formulate proposals, in close cooperation with the President of the Commission, on economic governance in the euro area and on deepening the economic and monetary union. This is exactly in line with the Treaty provisions on preparations for European Council meetings. It is therefore entirely normal that the European Council should ask its President to prepare far-reaching conclusions. It is also entirely normal that the President should cooperate closely with the Commission. The legislative initiatives themselves are, of course, a matter for the Commission, Council and Parliament.

The role of the President of the European Council goes beyond convening a meeting, setting the agenda and drafting conclusions. The President has to be in the driving seat, which I believe I was: I used my powers and roles fairly extensively, without becoming a 'lone ranger'. Government by announcement and token gestures, which can make leaders interesting but irrelevant, are simply not my style, a fact which is also borne out by my career in Belgian politics.

A key aspect of the President of the European Council's role is running the Union of Member States. I worked closely with each and every Prime Minister and President. I visited all the capitals once a year and attended many other meetings outside Brussels. I never considered myself as an 'EPP-man', or having better relations with members of my own party. On a not entirely unrelated theme, the European Council always managed to avoid a left-right split. Of course, there were nuances and sensitivities but they never engendered an ideological confrontation.

The Franco-German relationship is still very important to the Union and even more so to the euro area. This is not only because they are the two most important economies in the euro area, but also because they represent two sensitivities, which are even more complicated than the 'North-South relationship', as it is sometimes known. During my mandate, Franco-German cooperation was at times strong, some might say too strong (!), and at times either lacking or loose. This cannot be fully explained by the nature of the two presidencies in France - it is more nuanced than that. However, from the outset I had strong support from both countries in the face of tough decisions and vice versa, but we were able to agree on the EU budget and on the Banking Union (a decisive breakthrough) without the need for "precooked" Franco-German agreements. European Council meetings tended to take quite some time because 28 Member States had to reach agreement. It was not a case of 'Berlin and Lutetia locuta - causa finita'.

During the euro area crisis, the 'permanent' presidency represented continuity, which would have been sadly lacking had the response been handled by six rotating presidencies, of which three did not belong to the euro area. Continuity helped and brought added value to the system.

The simple fact that a stable presidency had time to prepare European Council meetings and invest in compromise-building brought further another value.

This continuity was also useful in relations with third countries, especially in bilateral summits with our strategic partners, in the G7/G8 and G-20 meetings. The President of the European Council and the President of the Commission had key roles in the external representation of the Union at the highest level. Their stability in their roles was often far greater than that displayed by some of our partners, which contributed to the relevance of the institutions on the global stage. A particular highlight was the G7 meeting in June 2014, hosted by the EU in European Council buildings.

Staff continuity was another important element, both inside and outside the Union. Personal relations matter, not only at leadership level but also at staff and chief of staff levels.

The relationship between the President of the European Council and the High Representative is 'work in progress'! There is no hierarchy. And the High Representative is not the President of the European Council's minister of foreign affairs, as might be the case with a national government. Moreover, the High Representative is 'double-hatted', acting as chair of the Foreign Affairs Council and Vice-President of the Commission, which is no mean feat!

During the crises on Libya and Ukraine, the European Council took the lead, in keeping with its role under the Treaty.

The President of the European Council holds centre stage in a rather complicated choreography involving 28 Member States and the EU institutions. He must respect each role and yet keep the troupe together in spite of their different sensitivities, North and South, East and West, left, right and centre, countries big and small, euro and non-euro area Member States. I suppose you could say he is Good Shepherd. "I am the good shepherd. I know my sheep and my sheep know me".

I suspect I benefitted from the crisis, which obliged leaders to take tough decisions unanimously. In fact, during the last two years of my mandate I noticed how difficult it had become to get a consensus in the euro area, except in the context of a crisis. The deepening of economic and monetary union was a first 'victim' of this more complacent behaviour. The toughest sanctions on Ukraine were only possible after the downing of MH-17. I hope the human tragedy in the Mediterranean paves the way for

more European answers and that the war in Ukraine gives an impetus to an energy union, which goes beyond a desire to become dependent on Russian gas.

I also hope that there is sufficient awareness of our weak economic structures. Our potential economic growth is too low for job creation and for the sustainability of our social models. The fragmentation of the energy, digital, telecommunication, defence, and research markets is an impediment to growth. In the middle of the economic crisis, I organised thematic European Council meetings on these themes and we made progress, but not enough. The gradual approach, which is traditional in the Union, unfortunately means we sometimes lack a sense of urgency.

The leaders of the institutions are taking initiatives in fields which are devoid of 'market pressure' and which therefore require impetus from the institutions "institutional pressure" and from its leaders.

A final word: I am not in favour of merging the presidencies of the European Council and the Commission. Such a merge could result in the President of the European Council subsuming the role of President of the Commission, or the other way around, and could involve more problems than solutions. The Union is set to remain a 'duet' between the Member States and the institutions. The two presidencies are emanations of this reality.

Though a directly elected Commission president would have a strong popular mandate, in the absence of proper policy tools, it would be doomed to disillusion. The Commission proposes legislation but does not have the final say. Direct election would require a complete recasting of the Union's architecture. This would mean much more than Treaty change. It would mean a revolutionary Treaty, which in the present climate of euro-scepticism and euro-negativism, would be no more than a vain intellectual exercise.

The Treaty is likely to remain fundamentally unchanged for a long, long time. In the interim, we should use its potential to the full. In order to do so, cooperative spirit is key. It will not prevent differences but it *will* help us to overcome them, because we will be serving a common cause. The Institutions are important but their importance is purely instrumental. I assumed my position as President with this maxim in mind.