Charles Michel as President of the European Council: The first 100+ days

On 1 December 2019, Charles Michel, previously prime minister of Belgium, became the third President of the European Council. He began his term in dynamic mode, aiming to make his mark in foreign affairs and develop the EU’s interinstitutional relations. While pursuing his predecessors’ efforts to secure unity between EU leaders, Michel has applied his own style, visible notably in his discourse, social media presence and transparency efforts. An analysis of the President’s Twitter activities shows his strong focus on EU-Africa relations, climate and, most recently, COVID-19.

BACKGROUND

In July 2019, Charles Michel was elected by the European Council as its third permanent President. He took over the post on 1 December, chairing his first European Council meeting on 12-13 December. Analysts often assess the performance of a political leader after his or her first 100 days in office. While it is too early to make an in-depth analysis comparing the three office-holders, now – after just over 100 days and in the light of the current context of the COVID-19 crisis – could be a good time to recap on the role of the President of the European Council and take stock of Charles Michel’s activities to date.

Although the European Council has no Treaty-based crisis-management role, its first two Presidents seem to be remembered – and their terms in office defined – by the crises through which they had to steer the EU. Herman Van Rompuy had to face the economic and financial crisis and Donald Tusk was confronted by the migration crisis. Just like his predecessors, Charles Michel is facing a substantial crisis at the very beginning of his mandate; the way he manages the COVID-19 pandemic is likely to shape the approach and substance of his first mandate at the helm of the European Council (see EPRS: The European Council as COVID-19 crisis manager: A comparison with previous crises). Before the COVID-19 outbreak reached the EU, Charles Michel was already starting to put his own stamp on the office of President, carrying out the tasks envisaged for this office in the Treaties.

Figure 1 – Presidents of the European Council and their mandates

Source: EPRS.
Role of the President of the European Council

The Lisbon Treaty introduced the office of full-time President of the European Council in 2009. The full-time president replaced the previous rotating presidency of the European Council, held by the Head of State or Government of the Member State holding the presidency of the Council of the European Union (Council of Ministers), who continues to chair most Council formations. The office of President was created, among other reasons, to bring more continuity and coherence to the work of the European Council.

The office of President of the European Council is described in Articles 15(5) and 15(6) TEU, and the term of office is limited to two and a half years, with the possibility of the same person being re-elected, but only once (see EPRS: The choice of the President of the European Council). The Treaty clearly states that the President of the European Council ‘shall not hold a national office’ (Article 15(6) TEU); however, it does not specify that it is forbidden to hold another EU office. He or she is elected by EU leaders by a qualified majority vote (QMV).

The tasks of the President are set out in Article 15(6) of the Treaty on European Union (TEU) and further described in the European Council’s rules of procedure (RoP) of 2 December 2009. According to the Lisbon Treaty and the RoP, the President of the European Council:

- chairs the European Council and drives its work forward;
- ensures the preparation and continuity of the work of the European Council in cooperation with the president of the Commission, and on the basis of the work of the General Affairs Council;
- endeavours to facilitate cohesion and consensus within the European Council;
- presents a report to the European Parliament after each of the meetings of the European Council;
- ensures the external representation of the Union on issues concerning its common foreign and security policy (CFSP), without prejudice to the powers of the High Representative of the Union for foreign affairs and security policy.

Charles Michel's action so far

Right from the start of his mandate, Charles Michel has been very active, in particular regarding foreign affairs issues and in identifying the priorities of the EU Heads of State or Government.

Focus on foreign affairs

Regarding foreign affairs, Charles Michel has concentrated on external crises, such as those in Libya and Syria, and on relations with Turkey, with the Arab world and with Africa. He has also developed a good working relationship with the High Representative, Josep Borrell. They met as early as July 2019, days after their respective nominations, to discuss future cooperation. The frequency of their meetings increased in the early days of their mandates. In certain cases, they have attended international events together (e.g. the Berlin Conference on Libya on 19 January 2020). At that event, Michel stated that work ‘to support the conclusion of a ceasefire and for the relaunch of the peace process’ was a joint effort with the High Representative.

The COVID-19 crisis might force Michel to scale down certain external activities and place others in the spotlight, including attention to bilateral relations with China. Despite concentrating attention on the COVID-19 crisis, Charles Michel is continuing to work on foreign relations issues, notably commenting on developments regarding the Western Balkans.

Taking the pulse of the EU Heads of State or Government

After his election, and before taking office, Charles Michel visited all the EU Heads of State or Government to consider their views on the work of the European Council for the coming months.
This exercise was repeated in late 2019 and early 2020 in the specific context of the negotiations on the multiannual financial framework (MFF), with Charles Michel holding a series of bilateral meetings with most members of the European Council with the aim of identifying room for compromise and the red lines of the different Member States. As part of the European Council’s COVID-19 crisis management activities, he also consulted with the individual members of the European Council before convening meetings to decide on a common approach.

Enhanced interinstitutional cooperation

With the new institutional cycle and the new leadership of the EU institutions, there have been renewed efforts to strengthen cooperation between the EU institutions. In his first report to the Parliament’s plenary as President of the European Council, Charles Michel extended his hand ‘to the European Parliament hoping that together we can play a useful role in the future of the European project’. The incoming president of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, voiced her wish ‘to strengthen the Commission’s partnership with the European Parliament. Likewise, the President of the European Parliament, David Sassoli, in his inaugural speech, called on the EU institutions to rethink their roles and ensure that they are no longer viewed as an impediment to a more united Europe’, assuring the Council and the Commission that Parliament would ‘work with them very closely’.

A first practical example of this closer cooperation came with the Presidents’ retreat at the Jean Monnet House (owned by the European Parliament) at Houjarray, outside Paris, on 31 January 2020, during which they jointly declared the need ‘to look to the future and build a new partnership between enduring friends’, committing their three institutions to ‘do everything in their power to make it a success’.

So far, Charles Michel has complied with his reporting duties to the Parliament. He reported following both the 12-13 December European Council and the special European Council meeting on 20-21 February 2020. In the past, Presidents of the European Council have not always reported to the European Parliament following special or extraordinary meetings. During the COVID-19 crisis and resulting reduction of physical meetings in favour of video conferences, it will be necessary to find alternative ways of reporting the results of European Council deliberations to Parliament.

Moreover, the other main element of the relationship between the European Council and the European Parliament, namely the statement by the European Parliament president at the beginning of European Council meetings, has been adapted to the new format of European Council meetings by video conference. At the third video conference meeting of the European Council regarding the COVID-19 outbreak, on 26 March, David Sassoli gave an opening statement, just like at traditional meetings of the European Council (see EPRS: Outcome of the video-conference of the European Council, 26 March 2020).

Charles Michel’s willingness to step up cooperation with Parliament has also been evident regarding the negotiations on the 2021-2027 MFF. When reporting to Parliament on 18 December 2019 on the outcome of the European Council meeting the previous week, the President stressed the ‘institutional role, based on the Treaties, of the European Parliament in the context of this decision-making process’ and expressed his ‘full respect and desire to develop this good cooperation with the European Parliament’. This approach has been welcomed by MEPs involved in the MFF negotiations. Johan Van Overtveldt (ECR, Belgium), Chair of Parliament’s Committee on Budgets, reported ‘a very constructive dialogue on Parliament’s priorities’ and the negotiating team’s appreciation for ‘President Michel’s openness’.

Unfortunately, at the end of the special European Council meeting on 20-21 February 2020 dedicated to the 2021-2027 MFF, EU Heads of State or Government failed to overcome their differences and reach an agreement on the long-term budget. Achieving this during the COVID-19 crisis, at a time when capacity to act is needed more than ever, will be even more difficult. This is due, on the one hand, to the focus on other issues and on the other, to the fact that video
conferences are not ideal for negotiations that traditionally rely heavily on break-out sessions between individual actors or groups in order to reach an agreement.

An early example of EU interinstitutional cooperation during the COVID-19 crisis was the statement by Presidents Charles Michel and Ursula von der Leyen with the Croatian Presidency on the COVID-19-related US travel ban.

**Style and discourse**

At the handover ceremony, on 28 November 2019, Charles Michel stressed that he would 'take a common-sense approach to problem solving with innovation and efficiency'. Echoing his predecessors, he has also underlined the importance of 'greater European unity', stressing that, as President of the European Council, he will 'encourage an unshakeable unity between EU leaders'. However, he intends to maintain his own style by being 'open for dialogue and committed to building bridges' though 'perhaps more cautious' with his tweets, 'at least at the beginning'. Areas in which Michel's own style have been observed include i) his discourse, ii) his social media presence, iii) his efforts at transparency, iv) his use of informal meetings, and v) his work plan.

**Discourse**

Based on the initial data, Charles Michel appears to be more communicative than his predecessors. For example, when reporting to Parliament after his first two European Council meetings, his statements were two to three times longer than those of Donald Tusk.

**Social media presence**

Whereas Herman Van Rompuy was a reluctant social media user as President of the European Council, Donald Tusk did pass messages via Twitter and Instagram. Charles Michel has further expanded the use of Twitter as a communication tool for the President of the European Council. Michel's Twitter output since becoming President clearly reflects his own priorities and the major topics and events arising during his term in office so far.

**Figure 2 – Political focus of Charles Michel’s tweets since 1 December 2019**

Figure 2 shows that Charles Michel has taken on an important communication role during the COVID-19 crisis. His attention to external relations, in particular to the African Union and climate issues reflect both his personal priorities and those of the European Council’s 2019-2024 Strategic Agenda. His attention to the Turkey/migration issue and to Auschwitz and the Shoah reflect his focus on current affairs.

The ‘other’ category includes small numbers of various types of tweet, such as congratulations expressed to newly appointed Heads of State or Government, or statements on the future of Europe or on natural or man-made disasters.
Transparency efforts
In a novel move, Charles Michel also publishes readouts from his telephone calls and meetings with international leaders, such as Russian President Vladimir Putin and the President of Turkey, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan.

Informal meetings
An EPRS analysis looking at the activities of the previous two Presidents of the European Council shows that, over the past 10 years, there has been an increase in the use by the President of informal meetings to discuss with EU Heads of State or Government. This trend is expected to continue, as Charles Michel has already indicated that he would like to see ‘more informal moments with and among leaders’. Although during the COVID-19 crisis all meetings have taken the form of video-conferences and been ‘informal’ in legal terms, this is not the same kind of informality that might be encountered at traditional informal meetings, notably those taking place in the country of the rotating presidency of the Council of the EU.

Work plan
At the 12-13 December 2019 European Council, Charles Michel explained his vision for the future work of the European Council, and presented European Council members with an ‘indicative agenda’ for its work over the coming years. In the days prior to the meeting, he identified climate change, the economy and the EU’s global role as priorities for the future. He stressed that a concerted agenda, coordinated between the institutions (Council, Commission and Parliament), was key to advancing the European project. Despite this initial intention to produce an agenda, the COVID-19 outbreak may lead to a crisis-driven agenda and the lack of a work programmeduring the first year of Michel’s mandate. This would place him on an equal footing with both of his predecessors, who, as a result of the urgent nature of the crises they faced, did not produce a long-term work plan during their first mandates.

ENDNOTE
1 Since the creation, in 2009, of the office of High Representative of the Union for foreign affairs and security policy, he or she chairs the meetings of the Foreign Affairs Council.

DISCLAIMER AND COPYRIGHT
This document is prepared for, and addressed to, the Members and staff of the European Parliament as background material to assist them in their parliamentary work. The content of the document is the sole responsibility of its author(s) and any opinions expressed herein should not be taken to represent an official position of the Parliament.

Reproduction and translation for non-commercial purposes are authorised, provided the source is acknowledged and the European Parliament is given prior notice and sent a copy.

eprs@ep.europa.eu (contact)
www.ep.europa.eu (intranet)
www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank (internet)
http://epthinktank.eu (blog)