

POLICY BRIEF

Political Leadership in the European Union: An Introduction

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In light of recent crises in the European Union (EU) there is a need for more systematic analysis of Political Leadership in the EU. In this brief we offer a theoretical and conceptual introduction for our collection. Drawing on Burns, Blondel, Elgie, Young, and others, this brief identifies how political leadership can be analyzed in various institutions and institutional settings of the EU. The questions we ask are: what kind of leadership is there in different domains; how and with what tools does political leadership occur and operate in various case studies and how effective have those been? The EU was originally designed to have no clear 'leader'. The question becomes: is the EU still 'leaderless'? We argue it is not. Yet it is difficult to synthesize the results into one overarching leadership concept, or identify the exact locus of leadership. This collection thus turns to various different institutions and some policy areas to see how these institutions and the EU as a collective actor demonstrate leadership.

Another often heard criticism of the EU is that too many leaders dominate the Union and that the contradictions between them prevent successful leadership. We do not find support for this criticism. Rather, political leadership in the EU is characterized by a complex interplay between a multitude of leaders or leading organizations with diverging powers and prerogatives, objectives, and constituents or followers. This interplay reflects the complex structure of a multilevel and a multi-state system that has to balance many divergent interests and to find common solutions for complex problems. In other words: it reflects a complex set of checks and balances.

This finding however does not mean that political leadership in the EU is in a good or even an adequate state. All leaders in the EU face serious constraints, either because of not disposing of the necessary formal or real powers, or because of an unfavourable situational context, or because of severe legitimacy dilemmas. Furthermore, European leaders are often not able to supply sufficient leadership. This situation emerges not only because of their lack of capacities, but also because of their incomplete knowledge about intricate problems. In addition, the institutional structure of the EU, with 28 member states and unwieldy procedures of decision-making, is not always conducive to a balanced interplay between European leaders representing different constituencies, let alone to speedy reactions in case of crises. In particular the shift of power to the intergovernmental institutions in relevant policy areas without establishing powerful counterweights, has led to decisions biased in favour of powerful member states, to stalemates and non-decision or – as in the case of the European Central Bank (ECB) – to actors taking on a leadership role that were not envisaged to perform such a function.

In theoretical terms, the contributions of this volume show that both classical concepts of political leadership in national and international contexts as well as more recent theoretical innovations provide useful tools for analyzing leadership in the context of the EU.

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